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MAURICE BLANCHOT

COMME UN JOUR DE NEIGE

Penché contre toi, pensée contre laquelle je m'appuie, mon front sur lequel pèse mon front, infranchissable gravité qui pourtant cèdes parfois pour me donner le sentiment du passé, espace très froid où l'espace, stérile, retourne à l'espace. Pourquoi dois-je te garder, toi qui me gardes? C'est un grand souci. Vivre ainsi en tout si loin de tout, et supporter cette légèreté comme un poids, t'adresser cette parole qui ne t'atteint pas, ne m'exprime pas, — et te tenir ferme pour que tu restes rigoureusement délimitée, petite chambre où il faut que quelqu'un demeure.

Je dois te tenir ferme, veiller à tes limites. Je dois surmonter le soupçon que ton immobilité serait sans repos, et ta stable présence un recul sans fin. Est-ce de moi que tu t'écartes? de ces pensées que je n'ai pas? de ces mots qui ne te parviennent pas? Est-ce que tu veux m'avertir d'un danger? Est-ce que tu voudrais parler? Tu t'agites, tu t'agites, je le sens. Cela m'agite aussi.

Je me suis étendu un instant. Quel calme auprès de toi. Quel vide ici. Il m'a semblé que nous nous taisions. Par la petite fenêtre entre un souvenir de lumière, et c'est une clarté froide qui pénètre partout, qui fait le vide et est la clarté du vide. Je me rappelle bien cette chambre que tu délimites strictement avec cette rigueur qui t'est propre, et d'où je ne puis

sortir, car ici déjà règne le dehors. Comme tout est précis, plus précis qu'il ne devrait l'être. Tu ne connais pas les ombres. Etrange que l'obscurité de la nuit soit cette immobile clarté solitaire. Je pourrais te décrire cet espace que tu formes, peut-être sans le connaître, et si je me penche au dehors, je vois le couloir éclairé par la lumière; si je m'y engage, déjà mes pas vont à ma rencontre. Mais je ne sortirai pas. Tous ces gens que je vois errer, ces figures semblables qui obéissent à la rumeur de la nuit selon laquelle il faut aller et venir sans arrêt: foi trompeuse, hâte stérile, erreur qui est la respiration de la nuit. Pourquoi cette hâte? Vers quel lieu? Est-ce vers ce lieu que vont aussi mes paroles, où elles entraînent je ne sais quoi de moi? Je sens en elles cet attrait vers la région vaine, mais, toi, pourquoi m'empêches-tu de m'écouler en cette rumeur? Pourquoi me préserves-tu d'être tout entier hors de moi? Pourquoi me sépares-tu de ce qui parle en moi, comme pour me détourner, un instant, de l'erreur où tout va, d'où tout revient? Quelle part ai-je à cette parole qui me sollicite par un doux entraînement à la suivre et à laquelle je ne résiste que parce que tu m'enfermes, — mais je n'y résisterai pas toujours, je le crains. Un jour, je dirai un mot que je ne sais pas et qui sera peut-être le signe de mon renoncement au calme qui m'attend. Et toi, serais-tu là pour m'amener à dire ce mot? As-tu pris la figure et la forme de ce que j'aime pour l'obtenir librement de moi. Qui es-tu? Tu ne peux pas être ce que tu es. Mais tu es quelqu'un. Alors, qui? Je le demande. Je ne le demande même pas. Nos paroles sont seulement si légères qu'elles s'ouvrent sans cesse en question.

Il y a ici des endroits que ta lumière éclaire, d'autres qu'elle éclaire aussi, d'autres qu'elle éclaire encore d'une même lumière égale. Par la fenêtre, je pourrais apercevoir beaucoup de détails intéressants, mais je ne suis pas curieux de ces choses: il me suffit de savoir que nous sommes là-bas, d'où ma curiosité me détournerait plutôt. C'est beaucoup d'être ainsi éclairé de tous côtés, à tout instant, d'une lumière qui ne vient de nulle part, qui attire seulement les images, puis les repousse, attire les légères pensées, puis les repousse. Je ne

suis pas sûr que cette clarté ait un rapport avec toi. J'incline à croire que tu n'éclaires pas, que tu te tiens aux confins où l'obscurité blanchit, sans qu'un autre jour paraisse. Que je sois couché dans cette fosse de lumière qui est strictement délimitée, sauf sur un point, je le reconnais. Rappelle-toi: les yeux sont fermés, et la bouche aussi est fermée. Cela se passait probablement dans cette chambre. J'avais sous les paupières le noir profond, velouté, riche et chaud que le sommeil préserve, que les rêves sentent toujours renaître derrière eux; et sans doute étais-je déjà mort dans bien des parties de moi-même, mais ce noir était encore vivant. Cela persista longtemps, peut-être éternellement. Je demeurais auprès du noir, peut-être en lui. J'attendais sans impatience, je surveillais avec légèreté l'instant où le noir se décolorerait et, en se décolorant, ne manquerait pas de faire se lever la blancheur finale. Jour ultime, soleil des morts. Peut-être est-ce cette lumière très blanche dans laquelle je suis immergé.

J'aimerais beaucoup que tu te confondes avec elle ou du moins que tu l'annonces, toi qui guettes, au delà de ce qui arrive, ce qui n'arrive pas. Es-tu le noir qui peu à peu périt et permet un instant l'illusion de voir clair? Es-tu seulement la patience qui m'y prépare, me prépare aussi à y renoncer? Est-ce que ce point noir que nous appelons le ciel, qui sans cesse recule, s'atténue, est-ce tout ce qu'il me resterait du noir vivant où je me suis éteint? C'est peu. Et toi, combats-tu pour le maintenir ou pour le dissiper? pour annoncer l'évidence qui lui succède ou pour la dénoncer? Etrange, étrange douleur que cette pensée si séparée.

Ce serait donc la nuit que cette transparence froide? Comme un jour de neige. Ce serait le noir succédant au noir sans corruption ni vision étrangère?

Sache-le, je ne désire pas que les choses se prolongent. Je n'en suis pas fatigué, je suis au contraire sans fatigue, sans cette obstination qu'il y a dans la fatigue. Attaché à toi, qui n'es que détachement. Léger de ce poids dont tu me chargeras. Je sais bien que de toutes manières tu n'existes pas, et que c'est là ce qui nous lie. Mais c'est en cela que je risque

aussi de me lier à toi, sans rêve et sans image, par un mouvement dont je me rappelle les vieilles ruses. Tranchant de la clarté vide, sur lequel tu veilles: il ne faut pas l'altérer.

Parfois, il me vient l'impression que ce serait moi, la grande pensée, et toi, l'assaut mené contre elle par le désir de ne pas penser encore que perpétuellement tu m'opposes.

Pourquoi ne veux-tu pas me penser? Est-ce impuissance, indifférence, vouloir aveugle? Est-ce que tu es d'un côté et moi de l'autre? Est-ce que nous sommes tous deux la même pensée, pareillement grave, solitaire et immobile, que cette identité séparée repousse à jamais l'une de l'autre, étrangères pour ne pas être confondues et pour maintenir l'égalité de l'équilibre? Est-ce que tu es dans la nuit la pensée que je suis dans l'autre nuit? Est-ce toi seule qui parles, qui me poses toutes ces questions auxquelles je ne réponds que par un silence qui ne répond pas? Est-ce que tu es toujours la sérieuse pensée de jadis que j'ai devancée? Est-ce que tu serais encore là-bas?

Amère, amère pensée: je serais donc là où tu n'es pas encore, je serais le grand moi contre lequel tu luttes en te refusant à le penser, la grande certitude à l'intérieur de laquelle tu ne trouves pas de place, qui ne te comprend donc pas en particulier. Peut-être la question de savoir si je suis déjà, et toi pas encore, ne peut-elle être tranchée. Je crois que cela ne changerait rien entre nous. Ce doute — amer, amer, je le reconnais — n'est qu'une forme de la légèreté qui sans cesse nous ravit. Et si je suis apparemment plus léger que toi, je le suis, non pour m'être déchargé de tout fardeau, mais léger par ce poids dont constamment tu me charges, ce poids de refus et d'oubli que tu es.

Tant qu'il y aura entre nous le rapport d'intimité qui me permet de t'interpeller, j'ai l'impression que tu resteras toi-même. Mais, malgré tout, il ne faut pas trop te fier à mes avances. Je conçois de moi un doute plus grand que ce que tu peux supporter. Et qui parle? est-ce toi? est-ce moi en toi? Est-ce la rumeur qui sans cesse passe entre nous et dont les échos différents nous parviennent de rive à rive? Ah,

comme tu frémis, comme tu sembles fuir devant l'agitation vers laquelle, dans ce cas, je t'attire en la détournant.

Il ne faut pas craindre. Ce qui nous sépare est de toutes manières infime: un moment de calme, un moment d'épouvante, mais de calme.

Remarque que je ne cède pas à la facilité de te regarder comme la dernière pensée, celle qui, lorsque j'en suis sorti, a ouvert l'espace et le maintient peut-être ouvert pour me congédier éternellement en me retenant. Que cela ne soit pas. Si tu étais ma dernière pensée, nos rapports cesseraient vite d'être supportables. Ce serait très pénible d'imaginer que ce qu'il y a de fixe dans ta présence, et cette pointe aiguë que tu caches, ce vide autour duquel tu te rassembles avec une autorité inflexible, tout cela qui te rend immobile et sûre comme le ciel, viendrait de cette pensée qui ne peut plus changer et sur laquelle tu te tiendrais transpercée, épinglée comme sur toi-même par cette fermeture de la souffrance qui refuse de parler.

Souffrirais-tu donc d'être une très petite pensée, au lieu de la pensée vaste sur laquelle tu avais le désir de déboucher? Très petite pensée, tu me plais bien ainsi. N'importe quelle pensée, la fin la fait vibrer à l'infini, jusqu'à l'immensité, par un glissement que ta rigueur, il est vrai, doit repousser comme illusoire. Ou bien est-ce l'immensité qui est encore trop peu pour toi, qui te paraît médiocre et mesquine, au regard de ce point que tu préserves et sur lequel tu te refermes par un resserrement effroyable?

Pourquoi ne veux-tu pas céder? Pourquoi inlassablement ramènes-tu l'immense à cette simplicité qui est, là où tu es, comme un visage que je pourrais voir? N'as-tu pas envie de la nuit, celle que je suis pour toi, comme tu l'es pour moi, où, t'enfonçant, tu te placerais exactement sur toi-même, réponse à ta question, question dont tu seras la réponse? Il faut nous fondre l'un dans l'autre. Ce qui est fin pour toi sera sûrement commencement en moi. N'es-tu pas tentée par le bonheur du cercle? Tu me précèdes, mémoire aimante, souvenir de ce qui n'a pas eu lieu. Tu me précèdes comme un

espoir, et pourtant je suis aussi ce que tu dois rejoindre, ce en quoi tu pourras te rejoindre. Penses-y, ajoute cela à l'extrême pensée.

Il est vrai que, moi aussi, j'ai encore ce désir de te parler comme à un visage qui me ferait face là-bas sur l'horizon. Visage invisible. Espace de ce visage toujours plus invisible et, entre nous, le calme. C'est comme si j'étais mort pour me rappeler cela, pour porter ce désir et ce souvenir le plus loin possible. Est-ce que l'on mourrait pour se rappeler quelque chose? Est-ce que tu serais l'intimité de ce souvenir? Est-ce que je dois parler pour que tu te places juste en face de moi? Et, toi-même, n'éprouves-tu pas le besoin d'être une dernière fois, auprès du calme, ce mince visage fermé? Possibilité ultime d'être regardée par la grande pensée et la grande certitude.

Je pense que c'est cela qui nous tente tous deux: moi, que tu sois un visage, ce qu'il y a de visible dans un visage, et toi, être encore une fois un visage pour moi, être une pensée et cependant un visage. Désir d'être visible dans la nuit, afin que celle-ci s'efface invisiblement en toi.

La plainte que j'entends tout à coup — en toi? en moi? *Éternels, éternels. Si nous sommes éternels, comment l'avoir été? comment l'être demain?*

Il dit qu'il y a toujours un moment où se souvenir et mourir — être mort peut-être — coïncident. Ce serait le même mouvement. Souvenir pur, sans direction, où tout se fait souvenir. Grande puissance dont il suffirait de savoir disposer pour mourir de mémoire. Mais puissance indisponible. Tentative alors malheureuse pour se rappeler à soi, recul, recul devant l'oubli, et recul devant la mort qui se souvient.

De quoi se souvient-elle? D'elle-même, de la mort comme souvenir. Souvenir immense où l'on meurt.

D'abord oublier. Se souvenir là seulement où l'on ne se souvient de rien. Oublier: se souvenir de tout comme par oubli. Il *y* a un point profondément oublié d'où tout souvenir rayonne. Tout s'exalte en mémoire à partir de quelque chose

qui s'oublie, détail infime, fissure minuscule où il passe tout entier.

S'il est nécessaire que j'en vienne à oublier, si je dois ne me souvenir de toi qu'en t'oubliant, s'il est dit que celui qui se souviendra sera profondément oublié de lui-même et de ce souvenir qu'il ne distinguera pas de son oubli, si, déjà et depuis longtemps, je pressens que je ne parviendrai à toi que mêlé à lui et confondu avec les images qui le dissimulent à lui-même, alors, sache-le...

Souvenir que je suis, que j'attends cependant, vers lequel je descends vers toi, loin de toi, espace de ce souvenir dont il n'y a pas de souvenir, qui me retient seulement là où depuis longtemps j'ai cessé d'être, comme si toi qui peut-être n'existes pas, dans la calme persistance de ce qui disparaît, tu continuais à faire de moi un souvenir et à rechercher ce qui pourrait me rappeler à toi, grande mémoire où nous sommes tous deux maintenus face à face, enveloppés dans la plainte que j'entends: *éternels, éternels;* espace de froide lumière où tu m'as attiré sans y être et où je t'affirme sans te voir et sachant que tu n'y es pas, l'ignorant, le sachant. Croissance de ce qui ne peut croître, attente vaine des choses vaines, silence, et plus il y a de silence, plus il se change en rumeur. Silence, silence qui fait tant de bruit, agitation perpétuelle du calme, est-ce là ce que nous appelons le terrible, le coeur éternel? Est-ce sur lui que nous veillons pour l'apaiser, le rendre calme et toujours plus calme, pour l'empêcher de cesser, de persévérer? Est-ce moi qui serais pour moi le terrible? Etre mort et attendre encore quelque chose qui vous fasse souvenir de la mort.

Attente, attente d'un visage. Etrange que l'espace puisse encore porter cette attente. Etrange que ce qu'il y a de plus sombre ait ce grand désir de regarder un visage. Ici, il y en a beaucoup, c'est vrai. Certains sont très beaux, tous ont même une certaine beauté et quelques-uns, autant que j'ai pu m'en rendre compte dans le couloir, sont merveilleusement attirants, dans la mesure peut-être où eux-mêmes subissent, dans le calme et le silence, l'attrait essentiel. Mais ce n'est pas tout à

fait de cela que j'ai envie. Peut-être y a-t-il beaucoup de figures, mais un seul visage, ni beau, ni amical, ni hostile, seulement visible: ce visage que je m'imagine que tu es, que tu es même certainement à cause de ce refus d'apparaître qui est en toi, et de cette immobilité grave, de cette rectitude qui jamais ne se détourne, de cette transparence qui ne peut se laisser troubler. Et cela seulement peut apparaître, qui se trouble.

Parfois, il semble que certaines figures, en se réunissant, essaient d'ébaucher un tel visage. Il semble que toutes éternellement s'élèvent les unes vers les autres pour le rendre présent. Il semble que chacune voudrait être l'unique pour toutes les autres, voulant que toutes soient l'unique pour elle et être pour chacune toutes les autres. Il semble que le vide ne soit jamais assez vide. Aspiration éternelle des images, erreur qui nous soulève et sans cesse nous mêle dans le désordre de la nuit, perdues et toujours rassemblées dans un élan joyeux où nous nous retrouvons. Illusion, bonheur de l'illusion, pourquoi lui résister? Pourquoi toutes ces figures ne peuvent-elles me donner le change? Pourquoi m'en tiens-tu à l'écart par cette pensée de l'espace qui pourrait, un instant, te rendre visible — plus invisible?

Peut-être seras-tu l'exception, la clarté qui ne s'obscurcit pas. Peut-être franchiras-tu les portes de la terreur, sans ce frémissement qui d'onde en onde est ici calme, est le frisson de calme dont nous nous exaltons, veilleurs légers autour de nous-mêmes. Il faut pourtant que je te voie. Il faut que je te tourmente jusqu'à ce que le grand espace nocturne s'apaise un instant en ce visage qui doit lui faire face. C'est comme s'il était nécessaire que tu ne renonces pas à la transparence et, claire, que tu restes toujours plus claire, jusqu'au bout refus de l'impensable, afin que se laisse voir en toi justement ce que les autres perdent dans leur bonheur hâtif d'être visibles. Trop belles figures troublées. Un visage ne peut pas être cela. Le visage ultime, seulement manifeste, hors d'attente et hors d'atteinte. Visage qui est le vide peut-être. C'est pourquoi il faut que tu veilles sur cet espace vide pour le

préserver, comme il faut que je veille pour l'altérer, combat où nous sommes ensemble, proches par le lointain, étrangers en tout ce qui nous est commun, présence où je te touche intacte et où tu me retiens à distance, distance formée de toi et qui pourtant me sépare de toi: fosse de lumière où je suis enfoui. Visage, visage de l'attente, pourtant soustrait à l'attendu, l'inattendu de toute attente, imprévisible certitude.

Ah, s'il est vrai que nous avons été vivants ensemble — et toi, tu étais déjà une pensée —, s'il est possible que ces mots qui ruissellent entre nous nous disent quelque chose qui nous vienne de nous, est-ce que jadis je n'ai pas toujours été auprès de toi ce désir léger, avide, insatiable de te voir et, pourtant, visible, de te transformer encore en plus visible, de t'attirer, lentement et obscurément, en ce point où tu ne pouvais plus être que vue, où la figure devenait la nudité du visage et ta bouche se métamorphosait en bouche? Est-ce qu'il n'y a pas eu un moment où tu m'as dit: « J'ai l'impression que, lorsque vous mourrez, je deviendrai tout à fait visible, plus visible qu'il n'est possible et à un point que je ne supporterai pas »? Etrange, étrange parole. Est-ce maintenant que tu dis cela? Est-ce qu'il mourrait en ce moment? Est-ce toi qui toujours meurs en lui, auprès de lui? Est-ce qu'il se pourrait qu'il ne fût pas assez mort, pas assez calme, pas assez étranger, est-ce qu'il faut qu'il porte plus loin encore ce désir, ce souvenir, est-ce là cette pointe extrêmement fine et prodigieusement lointaine qui toujours se dérobe et par laquelle, lentement, avec autorité, tu l'attires, tu le repousses dans l'oubli?

Pensée, infime pensée, calme pensée, douleur.

Plus tard, il se demanda comment il était entré dans le calme. Il ne pouvait en parler avec lui-même. Seulement étrange joie à se sentir en rapport avec les mots: « Plus tard, il... »

GILBERT LELY

LA MORT DU MARQUIS DE SADE

(*D'après des documents inédits*)

Lorsque, le samedi 11 novembre 1814, l'étudiant en médecine L.-J. Ramon, âgé de dix-neuf ans, et qui venait d'être nommé premier élève interne de la maison royale de Charenton, se présenta le matin pour commencer son service, M. de Sade, le croisant dans un couloir, aurait-il pu se douter que ce jeune homme inconnu était désigné par le destin pour veiller ses derniers moments et fermer ses yeux solitaires? Cinquante-trois années plus tard, au début de ses quelques pages de souvenirs sur l'illustre pensionnaire de l'hospice, le docteur L.-J. Ramon tracera ces lignes saisissantes: « Je le rencontrais fréquemment se promenant seul, d'un pas lourd et traînant, mis d'une manière fort négligée, dans le corridor avoisinant l'appartement qu'il habitait; je ne l'ai jamais surpris causant avec personne. Passant à côté de lui, je le saluais, et il répondait à mon salut avec cette politesse froide qui éloigne toute idée d'entrer en conversation... Rien ne pouvait me faire soupçonner en lui l'auteur de *Justine* et de *Juliette;* il ne produisait en moi d'autre effet que celui d'un vieux gentilhomme altier et morose ».

Ce même 11 novembre, le marquis adresse au sieur Pépin, propriétaire à Saumane, la dernière sans doute des innombrables lettres qu'il a écrites durant sa longue existence. Il lui mande son anxiété de savoir si la coupe du bois de la

Garrigue a bien été effectuée, ainsi que le marquait sa procuration transmise il y a plus d'une semaine à Me Roze, notaire à L'Isle-sur-Sorgue. M. de Sade désire qu'une partie des fonds devant résulter de la vente de cette coupe soit employée aux réparations urgentes de son château de Saumane — le seul bien qu'il possède encore — et que le surplus de la somme lui soit envoyé promptement, car il en a un besoin « inexprimable ». L'Isle-sur-Sorgue! Saumane! Le message ultime du marquis reçu le matin en Provence, dans l'air et la lumière qu'avaient respirés ses amours...

(Le poétique déterminisme, qui devait constamment diriger nos pas, depuis une quinzaine d'années, vers les traces de l'auteur de *Juliette*, a fait que nous avons vécu, entre août et décembre 1940, précisément à L'Isle-sur-Sorgue, dans la maison de ce Me Roze que mentionne la dernière lettre du marquis. Ce fut grâce à notre ami, le grand poète René Char, né dans la lumière tranquille de ce village qu'enlacent les bras transparents et musclés de la rivière jaillie du gouffre de Vaucluse, que s'ouvrit pour nous le refuge de la vénérable demeure. Le duc de Palerne, trésorier pontifical dans le comtat Venaissin, l'avait fait bâtir au début du XVIIIe siècle; en 1940 y régnaient Adèle et Louise Roze, les descendantes au quatrième degré de Philippe-Auguste-Dominique Roze, notaire de M. de Sade. L'étude de ce praticien, reprise successivement par son fils et son petit-fils, puis désaffectée après la mort de celui-ci, était demeurée en l'état où son dernier possesseur l'avait abandonnée, si ce n'est que les hauts plafonds effondrés par endroits avaient parsemé de leurs débris les noirs pupitres notariaux. Mais les dossiers étaient encore ouverts, les plumes d'oie debout dans les encriers taris; et si les morts viennent parfois *en permission* (enfant, nous avons cru que dans les familles leur lit était toujours préparé), le vieux clerc principal, se rasseyant devant sa table, aurait pu reprendre son travail là où il l'avait interrompu... Il ne sera pas indifférent aux biographes futurs de René Char d'apprendre que sa prime jeunesse a été baignée tout entière par le mystère de la maison Roze. Pour nous, dont le vaste appartement délabré comportait sa

chapelle particulière, les témoignages de notre gratitude à l'égard des vieilles demoiselle consistaient à ouvrir le matin et à refermer le soir les volets de leurs trente chambres et, pendant la veillée, près d'un feu de souches de vigne, dans le grand salon irréel décoré de sombres marines, ouvrages de Joseph Vernet, à les faire rire aux éclats en leur lisant *le Bourgeois gentilhomme,* tandis que résonnaient au dehors les mots de la rivière Sorgue à ses moulins inutiles...).

Revenons à notre propos. Grâce au précieux inventaire dressé après la mort de M. de Sade, on peut connaître le décor intime dans lequel il a vécu ses dernières années, les meubles dont il était entouré lorsque, d'une écriture large et noble, il recopiait sur de gros cahiers de vergé mince les brouillons de l'*Histoire secrète d'Isabelle de Bavière.*

Le logement du marquis, au deuxième étage, fait partie de l'aile droite des bâtiments hospitaliers. La pièce principale et la petite bibliothèque attenante donnent sur le jardin, du côté de la Marne. On y accède par une antichambre où s'ouvre un cabinet de débarras. Le mobilier est en mauvais état et respire la tristesse. Dans la chambre, un lit à bas piliers avec des rideaux de siamoise « flambée blanc et rouge », une bergère en velours d'Utrecht jaune, deux chaises foncées de paille grossière, un bureau de bois noirci, une commode à dessus de marbre; dans un parquet gris, une glace surmontée d'un tableau; à gauche de la cheminée, une armoire: elle contient les vêtements du vieil homme: quatre habits, cinq gilets et cinq culottes, le tout de différentes étoffes et couleurs; sur les murs, un portrait sans cadre — celui de son grand-père, le marquis Gaspard-François — et des miniatures représentant sa mère, son fils aîné Louis-Marie — tué dans une embuscade, sur la route d'Otrante, le 9 juin 1809 —, Mlle Anne-Prospère de Launay, chanoinesse, la belle-soeur qu'il avait aimée... Dans la bibliothèque une table et un fauteuil et, sur trois tablettes ainsi que dans une étagère de bois blanc, deux cent cinquante volumes environ, d'où se détachent à première vue les quatre-vingt-neuf tomes du Voltaire de Kehl; parmi les autres: *l'Esprit de Sénèque,* Suétone, Tacite, *Don Quichotte, la Princesse de*

Clèves, les *Contes* de La Fontaine, les *Eléments de la Physique de Newton*, Condillac, l'*Émile*, *le Pornographe*, *Delphine*, *le Génie du Christianisme*, l'*Histoire des Indiens*, et les ouvrages avoués de M. de Sade: *Aline et Valcour*, *les Crimes de l'Amour* et, en quatre exemplaires, son dernier roman publié: *la Marquise de Gange*.

Le vendredi 1er décembre 1814, M. de Sade, dont la santé dépérissait depuis quelque temps, cesse de pouvoir marcher. On le transporte dans un logement de deux pièces, sans doute moins exigu que le sien, où il est confié à la garde d'un domestique. (Il n'est question nulle part, dans les documents postérieurs au 5 novembre, de Marie-Constance Quesnet, que l'on se fût attendu, en de telles circonstances, à trouver aux côtés de son ami. Sans doute devait-elle à cette époque être absente de Charenton, car il est difficilement imaginable que, par une insigne dureté, le nouveau directeur de l'hospice, M. Roulhac du Maupas, en eût congédié depuis quelques jours la seule créature qui s'intéressât encore à la détresse du marquis).

Le samedi 2 décembre dans l'après-midi, Donatien-Claude-Armand est venu voir le malade et a prié M. Ramon de passer la nuit auprès de son père. Vers la fin de la journée, en allant assurer cette garde, l'élève interne se croise avec l'abbé Geoffroy, aumônier de la maison; le prêtre, qui sort de l'appartement de M. de Sade et a pris rendez-vous avec lui pour le lendemain matin, paraît « sinon édifié, mais au moins satisfait de sa visite ». Le jeune homme entre chez le marquis et s'installe à son chevet. Il lui administre à plusieurs reprises quelques gorgées de tisane et d'une potion qui lui a été prescrite contre l'« engouement pulmonaire à forme d'asthme » dont il est atteint. La respiration de M. de Sade, qui est « bruyante et laborieuse », s'embarrasse de plus en plus. Vers vingt-deux heures, et peu de temps après l'avoir fait boire, M. Ramon, « n'entendant plus aucun bruit et surpris de ce calme », s'approche de son lit et constate que le vieillard est mort.

Le lendemain, M. Roulhac du Maupas avise Son Excellence le directeur général de la Police, du décès de M. le

marquis de Sade, et lui observe qu'il ne paraît pas nécessaire de faire apposer des scellés, car il « présume assez de l'honnêteté de M. de Sade fils pour croire que de lui-même il supprimerait des papiers dangereux, s'il en existait chez son père ». Cependant, à la fin de la matinée, les sieurs Demoustier et Dubuisson, selon toute vraisemblance employés de l'hospice, se présentent à la mairie de Charenton-Saint-Maurice pour la déclaration d'usage. Tandis que midi sonne, l'acte de décès est établi.

M. de Sade avait écrit son testament le 30 janvier 1806. On en trouvera, dans le second tome de l'histoire de sa vie (qui paraîtra à la fin de l'année chez Gallimard) le texte intégral publié pour la première fois: seul en est connu à ce jour le cinquième paragraphe, qui a suscité l'admiration par sa farouche grandeur où semble résonner l'accent du poète des *Destinées*. (...« *La fosse une fois recouverte, il sera semé dessus des glands, afin que par la suite le terrain de ladite fosse se trouvant regarni, et le taillis se trouvant fourré comme il l'était auparavant, les traces de ma tombe disparaissent de dessus la surface de la terre comme je me flatte que ma mémoire s'effacera de l'esprit des hommes* »...). Mais à ce stoïque pessimisme s'ajoutaient les marques les plus touchantes de la reconnaissance et de l'amour: on verra, dans les paragraphes inédits de ce testament — qui débute par un éloge de Mme Quesnet, dont la « courageuse énergie » l'a sauvé de la « faux révolutionnaire » —, le marquis uniquement soucieux d'assurer pour toujours à Marie-Constance un revenu « suffisant à ses aliments et à son entretien » et de faire remettre entre ses mains fidèles tous les livres et manuscrits qu'il pourra laisser en mourant.

Donatien-Claude-Armand eut-il le front de contester devant justice le legs de 24.000 livres que l'aimable Mme Quesnet avait si constamment mérité? Cet avare bigot, qui avait donné des preuves de son savoir-faire après le décès de Mme de Sade, n'aurait, certes, éprouvé aucun malaise à s'approprier le bien d'une femme sans défense. Mais la clause du testament était formelle, et il est permis de supposer qu'au nombre

des créances de la légataire, mentionnées pour mémoire dans l'inventaire après décès, pouvait être sous-entendue, sans préjudice de son hypothèque ancienne de 28.200 fr., la somme que le marquis lui avait laissée et que la vente du domaine de Saumane était capable de couvrir très largement. Toutefois nous demeurons là-dessus dans le domaine des hypothèses, et nous ne savons pas davantage si la bibliothèque du défunt fut remise à Marie-Constance. Quant aux manuscrits de M. de Sade, police et famille se les partagèrent, l'une pour les confier aux flammes, l'autre pour les ensevelir dans une malle d'où ils ne devaient être exhumés qu'à la cinquième génération. Ce sera toujours l'honneur du marquis Xavier de Sade d'avoir, à notre requête, autorisé la publication de ces rares chefs-d'œuvre que constituent les lettres de son aïeul écrites de Vincennes et aussi l'*Histoire secrète d'Isabelle de Bavière.*

Pour en revenir à Donatien-Claude-Armand, rappelons qu'on l'a vu profiter de la détention de son père à Charenton pour le dépouiller honteusement de presque tous ses biens et, en septembre 1814, se récuser, malgré des conventions expresses, devant le paiement d'un arriéré de pension que lui réclamait le directeur de l'hospice. Trois ans après la mort du marquis, M. Roulhac du Maupas se plaindra encore au préfet de Police de « l'héritier sans pudeur qui refuse d'acquitter la dette sacrée des aliments fournis à son père ». Pendant quatorze années, la maison royale de Charenton réclamera vainement à Donatien-Claude-Armand une somme de 7.534 livres, comprenant 2877 livres d'avances en espèces consenties à son pensionnaire entre 1803 et 1808. Dans un autre ordre de bassesse, ce fils impie, après avoir demandé à la police de détruire par le feu l'inestimable manuscrit des *Journées de Florbelle,* assistera lui-même à cet acte de vandalisme.

Un seul acte de piété filiale peut être mentionné au crédit de cet avide et morne personnage: pour obéir à l'interdiction formulée par M. de Sade, Donatien-Claude-Armand viendra demander avec instance à M. Roulhac du Maupas, et obtiendra de celui-ci, que le corps de son père ne soit point livré à la dissection.

Mais au mépris de ses autres dispositions testamentaires, le marquis devait être inhumé religieusement dans le cimetière de la maison de Charenton. Sa fosse y fut creusée « à l'extrémité orientale droite, presque au bord du Saut-du-Loup » séparant la concession du bois de Vincennes. Aucun nom ne fut gravé sur la tombe, qui reçut une croix de pierre. Il en coûta soixante-cinq livres, dont dix pour le cercueil, six pour la chapelle, neuf pour les cierges, six pour l'aumônier, huit pour les porteurs, six pour la fosse, vingt pour la croix. On ignore la date de la cérémonie et de quelles personnes était formée la suite qui accompagna M. de Sade jusqu'à sa dernière prison.

Tel s'enfonça dans la nuit muette l'homme qui, vingt-huit ans captif, demeure l'« esprit le plus libre qui ait encore existé ». Sa subversion ne s'éteindra jamais: sans préjudice d'œuvres moins inquiétantes qui pourraient suffire à sa gloire — le *Dialogue, Aline et Valcour,* la correspondance —, son cerveau athlétique a porté à leur paroxysme, dans *Sodome, la Nouvelle Justine* et *Juliette,* la frénésie du verbe et l'orgueil du tragique savoir.

MAURICE BLANCHARD

OFFENBARUNGEN

(Le lieu des révélations)

Un druide centenaire enleva l'enfant
à peine né, sur un buisson d'épines.
Il le conduisit dans sa forêt de
chênes festonnés de lierre.
Là, il lui fit un abri avec des branches
cassées et les feuilles de l'automne,
puis il s'en alla rechercher d'autres enfants.
Il voulait fonder un nouveau
royaume.
Les arbres, ici ne meurent point, ils
s'effondrent.

Sur le plateau boisé, à mille pieds
au-dessus du marécage, un peuple nouveau
et pur, formé pour la lutte implacable de
chacun contre soi-même s'épanouit et
devint puissant.
Les jeunes hommes taillaient le granit
pour des tombeaux qui ne s'ouvriraient
jamais plus et, chaque printemps, le vieux
druide sacrifiait la jeune fille la plus
belle pour que la Mort s'en nourrisse.

SPLENDEURS ET MISÈRE

Ce que fut l'enfance du gladiateur?
Une splendide fleur de joie:
Joie de vaincre et mépris des victoires
inégales et faciles.
Il inventa des bottes magiques,
pour aller loin,
pour bondir plus haut encore.
Il acquit le don d'apprivoiser les objets.
Pour insulter les puissants, il construisit un
silence noir et givrant qui lui ouvrit les
portes de l'Enfer!
Il les remercie profondément,
pour les humiliations reçues, pour leurs injustices,
leurs ricanements et leurs vengeances
par personnes interposées, et pour toutes
leurs petites saletés qu'il transforma
en une cuirasse d'acier étincelante.
Vivre, c'est la guerre!

LA CHEVAUCHÉE D'ATTILA

Les chevaux frappaient de leurs sabots
le sol de la ferme. Je ne dormais point
et je vis partir les cavaliers.

La châtelaine aux cheveux d'or les
regardait du haut de sa tour.
L'on entendit, venus d'au-delà des
remparts, les cris et les hurlements
des femmes jetées dans le massacre
et l'incendie.

La châtelaine fit rassembler
sa garde au pied de la Tour et se
jeta sur les piques dressées. Alors,
un soleil nouveau se posa sur elle
et, pendant des jours et des jours,
illumina l'herbe rase des coeurs
meurtris.
Depuis, le monde n'eut plus rien à m'offrir
si ce n'est la solitude et la rage au coeur.

ANDRÉ DU BOUCHET

LE VOYAGE

Rien ne distingue la route des accidents de ce ciel.

Nous allons sur la paille molle et froide de ce ciel, — à peine plus froide que nous, par grandes brassées, comme un feu rompu dont il faut franchir le genou, qui s'éclipse.

Je tiens deux mains chaudes, deux mains de paille. Un front de paille avance près de moi dans le champ obscur, sous ce genou blanc. Entre mes membres et ma voix, — le sol, avant le matin.

L'horizon est proche du seuil de la pièce où je suis perdu.

L'arbre ou la carrosserie qui recueille un moment l'horizon.

Le ciel est plus accessible que la terre sur laquelle nous marchons. Mais je n'ai pas surpris la terre ou le ciel en me levant, en descendant dans l'air.

Le champ plat.

Le champ où j'ai été frappé, que je repousse jusqu'à l'arbre. Cette terre qui sort de la terre et qui ne bouge pas. J'entends le vent.

Par la fenêtre ouverte qui donne sur une porte ouverte, je vois le mur de la rue.

A l'aube, j'ai été surpris de ne pas pouvoir éteindre.

Je serai aussi bien expliqué que le buisson, — encore là. Deux doigts froids, deux pincées de terre aux coins des yeux. A nos doigts se mêle la tête sèche de l'herbe. J'ai toujours cette demeure de brume au coin du visage.

Aux premières lueurs du jour.

Remercié d'un plaisir que je ne donne pas.

Le lent travail du métal des faux à travers les pierres. La terre houleuse fulmine.

Une nouvelle clarté, plus forte, nous prend les mains. L'espace qui est entre nous s'agrandit comme si le ciel, où le double visage s'embue, reculait démesurément.

Je vis de ce que l'air délaisse et dont je démêle à peine ce regard qui finit de s'épuiser dans la terre froide au goût de brûlé.

Ici
et rien

cette route

la dérision
des murs

l'épaule froide

les draps
le vent se lèvent.

La lumière ne contamine pas le jour. L'eau ne la fait pas siffler.

Je regarde l'air animé comme si, avant l'horizon lisse, j'étais embarrassé du corps que j'embrasse. Sur ce sol encore retourné, — où le jour en suspens vient s'abreuver à mon pied, comme fixé dans sa blanche indécision. Comme un arbre.

Comme la veste de ce glacier que l'usure couvre de son givre.

Mon arrivée, ma sortie de terre. Je reviens du fin fond des terres à ces confins, — à l'heure où le jour brûle encore sur les bords, ou y fait courir un cordon de feu. Mais la paroi blanche, — dorée, glacée par la lumière qui la rehausse et y fait courir de faibles montagnes.

L'air dans lequel je me dissipe.

Même lorsque le cadre terrestre est dans le feu, que l'évidence se dissipe sur ce dos excorié, comme le pas sur le cadre des routes, — plus qu'il ne fuit.

Il n'y a pas de route, mais le jour élargi qui me laisse aux prises avec ce sol où il s'incruste. Au moment où la terre se cristallise, se raréfie, — et, avant le dernier bond, fait demi-tour, disparaît.

Comme le champ qui afflue jusqu'à la clôture grande ouverte où il s'arrête, pendant que le soleil, à la fin du jour, nous inonde de sa glace, et disparaît.

Mais toujours, dans l'air cristallin, le front têtu de la clôture qui, si possible, se fait plus proche, — bien que nos pieds soient libérés de la poussière qui anéantit comme du sol froid. Je sais encore, sur ce foyer piétiné et froid qui se sépare lentement de son feu, que derrière moi l'oreille brûlante

du soleil me suit, — sans même relever la tête vers le champ rose, avant que la nuit roule et nous ait anéantis.

Comme une goutte d'eau en suspens, — avant que la terre se dilue. Je vois la terre aride.

Devant cette paroi qui s'ouvre, front traversé par le vent qui devance le visage et s'approfondit, un arbre comme un mur sans fenêtre, — à côté du ciel révélé au tournant de la route basse et froide qu'il regagne, comme une porte toujours ouverte.

Elle —, l'éclat, la tête impérieuse du jour.

A l'instant où le feu communiqué à l'air s'efface, où la blancheur du jour gagne, — sans soleil. La terre de ce champ pauvre dont nous sépare le talus du jour.

Cheminant vers le mur bleu devant lequel j'ai toujours fait demi-tour, j'avance lentement dans l'air pour atteindre à l'immobilité de l'autre mur.

Au moment de cette fracture, du silence subit, où l'air affligé d'un dernier remous se stabilise et dure.

L'air qui s'empare des lointains nous laisse vivants derrière lui.

MARYSE LAFONT

CHANT DES FEUILLES

I

Nous nous sommes alliés
A l'oiseau

Et c'était l'encens du printemps

L'oiseau inventera l'été du monde

Car tu sais entrouvrir
Sur les saisons futures
L'envol
Deux ailes, le bleu du temps.

II

Quand tu t'éveilleras
Dans une vraie clémence
Quand ton regard enfin pourra se reposer
Sur la simple lueur de joie
Tu retrouveras la couleur de l'arbre
Poursuivie par toi.

Alors la dernière branche
Te touchera
Et tu créeras pour mon bonheur
Le signe d'achèvement.

III

Ma barque a retrouvé une rose éveillée
Tremblante au bord de l'eau
Qui ne dort que pour moi.

IV

Tu regardes
Il y a l'amour
Sa marche lente

Devant nous le mouvement
La réalité du royaume

En moi le jeu
La force de toujours

Et puis l'espace creusé
Dans la nuit des tilleuls.

V

Chêne tu peux lier les fleuves et les jours
Tu es seul à bord
Et tu rejoins la falaise interdite

Chêne des quatre vents
Tu interroges l'eau libre
Et tu donnes au ruisseau
L'humidité des nuits.

MICHEL MANOLL

LA VÉNITIENNE

I

Incrusté au temps qui voyage, ô mon if azuré chancelant sous les lambris de cette cathédrale de silence, est-ce à ta cime pavoisée de printemps que saignera le coeur taciturne des statues?

Ignorante et ignorée et si près de t'éparpiller en neige, je n'ose te toucher pour éveiller les deux faces de ta métamorphose.

C'est une pierre de cascade dévalant les glaciers qui soudain chante et perce la voûte.

Mon front est couvert de débris de vent, de moelle de sureau et de cris de grillons. Le soleil s'évase comme une tortue phosphorescente.

O le bain de lumière dans les hauts fonds du cratère. O l'archet qui coudoie la moisson de velours et la prairie qui brame avant la mort du coeur, en pleine cicatrice.

II

Si je te parle, tu deviens plus sourde que l'écorce, plus muette que la ligne close que mes flèches n'atteignent pas.

Tu es l'implacable fardeau qui fait rouler bord sur bord l'infertile océan.

[illegible]

[illegible]

[illegible]

V

Il n'y a plus d'oiseaux, ni de duvet sur l'allée où l'essaim des saisons bourdonne;

Il n'y a plus de mots, ni de voix dans le filet tendu au bord des lèvres,

Mais une attente, une patience en robe de juin dans un paysage de brisants et d'hivernage,

Mais une grotte de gypse où perlent des stalactites, comme des larmes suspendues à l'étal du destin,

Et toujours vide, toujours étincelant de faux diadèmes, un voyageur de la nuit, sur le quai désert.

VI

C'est en franchissant la passe que commence la giration des lampes qui viennent se poser comme une houle de lucioles dans les nids phosphorescents des vagues.

Elles gravitaient sur les parois que les oiseaux de nuit rayaient de leur vol de bure.

Et celui qui gisait, lacéré par les flammes, n'entendait que le ressac de son coeur.

Mais nul ne franchit plus le porche de cette cathédrale engloutie et sur l'horizon lisse un astre s'évapore au premier passage de la lune.

VII

Oiseau nyctalope aux beaux yeux d'éternelle mélancolie est-il vrai que tes serres entr'ouvrent les lacs de nitre où flotte l'esquif terrestre?

Est-il vrai que sur ton juchoir semé d'escarboucles, des pans de chair s'étiolent qui furent soumis aux incandescences de l'amour?

Et toi, l'innommé, le toujours meurtrier ne jailliras-tu pas de la combe où flotte le coeur décapité?

VIII

Tu reviens encore, tourterelle menacée par les orages diluviens, te dépouillant de ta robe de prairie et lentement désarmée par mon amour.

Une nuit de mars, à l'heure où le coq mélange goutte à goutte dans l'aurore son cri effervescent, tu te sépares du monde spatial, de ces contrées à jamais étrangères où tes pas s'effacent.

Et te voici, grande et vigilante, faisant craquer les sarments de mon coeur.

Je m'éveille au clairvoyant matin, dans l'universelle solitude de la lumière, écartant les tiges opaques de mon visage, et tout s'efface, tout s'effrite au fond du sablier.

Laisse-moi un duvet, une aile secourable, une odeur de vagues

Et le tintement des cloches sous-marines au fond du passé-fantôme qui me hante, qui me hante.

IX

Je suis monté au sommet du printemps pour assister à la pariade des astres,

Mais le silex a plus d'éclat que le ciel en fusion et je tourne la tête vers les prairies où s'accomplissent les féeries nuptiales.

La pariétaire, à point nommé, effiloche sa robe de murailles et le buisson s'accouple à son ombre.

Il ne reste que cet homme vertical, sevré de soifs, qui écoute tinter dans son coeur les graviers de l'abîme; il a perdu jusqu'à ses traces et les lierres s'acharnent à briser les fils de la lice.

Pas de reflet sur son front; pas de palmes sur ses blessures.

Son regard est à vif et il saigne en vain pour les flaques et les cratères.

X

Un seul pavé arraché de sa gaine, un éboulis de feuilles dans l'avalanche de l'automne et je vis d'écroulements, de cataractes, à jamais étranger aux promesses du jour.

Il n'y a pas de richesses pour l'aveugle; pas de passage, ni de fuite pour l'emmuré.

Mais une interminable attente qui s'effrite en poussière de marbre.

XI

Elle déchirait les ténèbres, les mains vaporeuses comme une nuée de bourgeons et déjà franchissait la porte interdite où l'on flagellait la lumière.

Mais les lanières effleuraient la cible qui s'élevait lentement dans l'azur.

La bouche écumante, dans un saccage de paroles, elle lapidait l'unique joyau, plus avide d'imprécations et de menaces que d'aériennes conquêtes.

XII

Enfonce-toi sous la voûte du printemps que les lustres du marronnier avivent de blanche et floconneuse lumière.

Le monde s'est mis à bouger — le monde est une feuille blanche où saillent les veines du soleil.

C'est assez de la course inutile, contre le vent, contre l'indéracinable solitude.

C'est assez de migrations vers les terres sans aurores, alors que couvent sous tes paupières, dans le duvet d'un jeune matin, les perles odorantes des lilas.

XIII

Elle est à portée de la main comme un épi de feu sur la tige du matin,

A portée du gui, de la guitare, de l'aubépine — blanche façade des blanches nuits.

L'archet cueille les chansons qui émergent de son silence et l'entraînent loin de toute terre habitée.

Nous sommes deux dans l'insondable cratère du jour — merveilleuse déchirure toujours embrasée — débridant la lave et les corolles du désert.

XIV

C'est toujours la même meule aiguisant le visage au fond du gouffre où les dépouilles du drame s'élèvent comme une muraille géante.

Il est trop tard pour recommencer la pièce au premier aveu, au premier cri, au premier feu, au premier éblouissement.

Il est trop tard pour s'arracher aux ombres qui gravitent, avant que l'issue secrète n'apparaisse, vêtue des couleurs du silence qui glisse lentement sur sa banquise.

XV

Il y a tant de toisons laineuses que nul ne pourra carder et tant de chardons au bord des gaves pour le sommeil des laboureurs.

Et tant de bornes à l'avancée des glacis où fermentent le chanvre et l'hysope.

Mais devant moi c'est une muraille de saphir, frottée de flammes qui s'effondre en poussière murmurante, toujours plus légère, plus dépouillée et voisine des mues océanes.

Et ma voix ne plane plus, avec les seigles et l'avoine, au-dessus des jachères où paissent les licornes, marchant l'amble, le front couronné d'aubépines.

Eveillez-vous, frontières qui m'attendez, déployant les nouvelles pervenches et pigmentant votre haleine des senteurs éparses au fond de l'air, tandis que le jour se détache et se rompt comme un miroir dévoré par l'orage.

XVI

Si tu n'es pas le corps qui s'ouvre sous l'inviolable main d'une enfance diurne, laisse au moins pénétrer dans la chambre l'aurorale chaleur des regards.

Tant d'yeux te dépouillent; tant de mains te persécutent et te saccagent que je ne trouve plus d'éclat à saisir, plus de parcelle à aiguiser.

Tu te dénoues dans mes bras comme un soleil d'hiver et je ne touche, en ta chair, que les zones de silence et d'indigence.

Infidèle au temps qui te précède, tu détruis le germe dans le sillon, toujours plus étrangère, plus imperceptible sur l'horizon, plus privée de nom.

XVII

Est-ce toi, tournoyant comme un feu de mer et naufragée sur le frêle radeau des trottoirs, qui cherches à m'atteindre, malgré la gaine de pierre qui enrobe ton visage?

Je n'ai pas d'autre préoccupation que de démêler l'écheveau de la rue pour y chercher le point minuscule, le grain de vie, la particule infinitésimale.

Et ce sont, dans la ville, toutes ces parcelles mouvantes qui font s'agiter les rideaux, derrière les vitres, et battre le coeur tourmenté des poètes;

Tous ces reflets encore incertains de leur chute qui viennent à la rencontre des visage, qui s'effeuillent sur le marbre du jour.

LOUIS GUILLOUX

HAMEAU 1935

Par un soir d'automne de l'année 1935, au hameau de Kergrist, vers les six heures, une vieille femme grimpée sur un talus appelait:

« Annette! Annette! ».

Elle devait avoir l'habitude de grimper là pour appeler les enfants; ils l'entendaient et la voyaient de loin.

Entre deux rafales, quand le vent s'apaisait un peu, la voix de la vieille toute bégayante de colère s'entendait:

« Annette, sale petite garce! ».

Le corps raide comme une barre sous la jupe claquante, elle regardait au loin, une main devant les yeux.

« Annette, sale petite garce! ».

Personne ne répondait. Le vent éteignait les mots sur les lèvres de la vieille et lui battait les paupières; autour de son front têtu, ses maigres cheveux s'effilochaient. Déjà la nuit descendait dans la brume des collines et emplissait la vallée, gagnait le village, dont le clocher se voyait encore dans le ciel très noir traversé de gros nuages rougeâtres. Le raidillon était désert, la lande vide. D'une abbaye voisine, arriva un tintement de cloche.

« Petite peau maudite! Annette, coureuse, répondras-tu? »

Un homme se tenait debout près de la vieille. C'était un mutilé de guerre, corpulent, vêtu comme un bourgeois de

chef-lieu, il avait une jambe de bois: Monsieur l'Inspecteur de l'Assistence Publique. La vieille l'observait à la dérobée: il bombait le dos sous le vent, serrait d'une main le col de son pardessus.

« Annette! Aaaan-nette! Oh! maudite! »

De la paille arrachée à une meule tourbillonna dans le courtil. Le mari de la vieille était là aussi, immobile sur ses jambes écartées et les mains dans les poches, regardant voler la paille. Des brindilles jaunes dansèrent au vent et roulèrent dans la boue. De temps en temps, l'inspecteur hochait la tête et jetait comme un grognement à toute cette misère qui l'entourait: une étable au toit crevé, accotée à la demeure basse, collée au sol, une cour sale, volée sur la mauvaise terre d'un champ, à flanc de côte. « Pire que des bêtes, et avec ça, abrutis d'alcool ». Il haussa le épaules.

« Annette! Appelle-la donc, toi, Auguste! »

Mais le mari ne broncha pas.

Où diable se cachaient-ils? Dans le bois peut-être. Et Auguste qui était là à l'épier! Puisse-t-il crever! Il était survenu dans le courtil comme une ombre, presque sans bruit malgré ses gros sabots ferrés, juste comme elle allait parler à l'Inspecteur, l'amadouer, lui soutirer de l'argent. Quoi, pourtant, est-ce que cette petite Marcelle n'avait pas été malade? Est-ce que le médecin n'était pas venu deux fois la voir? Avait-il besoin de savoir, l'Inspecteur, que le médecin n'avait pas voulu d'argent? Ni le pharmacien? Cent soixante-quinze francs que Perrine aurait pu toucher. Mais Auguste ne le voudrait pas. Depuis qu'il était revenu de la guerre, avec sa face de mort et ses yeux qui faisaient peur au monde, il avait de drôles d'idées en tête. Il ne voulait rien leur demander. « Plutôt crever que de leur devoir un sou! ». Il avait refusé sa pension, la gueule à lavasse!

« Annette! ».

« Oui, la mère... ».

Un flot d'injures glapies, des questions qui n'attendaient pas les réponses: la veille accueillit de petites formes haillonneuses, jaillies de l'ombre.

« Où étais-tu, coureuse, où étais-tu quand on t'appelle? ».

Une gifle claqua. Dans sa figure creuse, salie de barbe et de terre, les grands yeux d'Auguste jetèrent des lueurs. Qu'elle recommence! Qu'elle la gifle encore!

L'Inspecteur s'avança.

« Allons, dit-il, montrez-moi cette petite ».

Annette baissait la tête, en se protégeant de son bras, sans répondre. Douze ans, les pieds nus, un méchant sarrau en loques. Les autres enfants, des tout-petits, s'étaient arrêtés net à la vue du Monsieur. Ils se serraient peureusement autour d'une autre fillette, un peu plus jeune qu'Annette: cette petite Marcelle que l'inspecteur venait voir. Il les compta des yeux: trois, quatre tignasses blondes et rousses, huit pieds nus, sauf ceux de Marcelle.

« Ils sont tous à vous? ».

« Tous, sauf Marcelle, répondit la vieille, avec une sombre violence. Et il y a encore deux grands garçons, pour me damner! ».

Cela faisait sept enfants qu'elle avait mis au monde. Mais plus ils étaient pauvres, plus ils faisaient d'enfants. « Des inconscients tout de même », se dit l'inspecteur, en fronçant les sourcils.

« Viens ici, Marcelle! Approche! dit la vieille, d'une voix doucereuse en prenant Marcelle par la main. Viens avec moi, ma jolie, viens dire bonjour à Monsieur l'Inspecteur... ».

Cette voix de miel, ce sourire de sorcière: Auguste haussa les épaules...

Marcelle était une petite fille de dix ans, une enfant maigre, presque chétive.

« Approche, ma fille, n'aie pas peur, continua la vieille, en s'efforçant de lui faire abaisser le bras qu'elle tenait devant ses yeux. Le monsieur est gentil, ma biquette... ».

« Montre-moi tes yeux? dit l'inspecteur en se penchant vers l'enfant. Je ne suis pas méchant, tu sais ».

La petite ne bougea pas. Sauvage, elle tenait son visage caché sous son bras. La vieille se fâcha:

« Boudeuse! Veux-tu répondre? ».

« Chut! dit l'inspecteur, avec un geste apaisant de la main. Laissez-moi faire. Il ne faut pas avoir peur, Marcelle. Personne ici ne te veut de mal ».

L'oeil pointu, la vieille observait la scène. L'inspecteur caressa les cheveux de la fillette, tâta ses vêtements; elle était assez chaudement habillée. Ses souliers étaient mauvais, attachés par des ficelles, soit, mais enfin...

« Dis-moi... es-tu bien ici? ».

« Oh! Celle-là, s'écria la vieille, à bout de patience, elle ne dira rien, allez! C'est une bouche cousue. Dis, mais dis donc à Monsieur l'Inspecteur si tu n'es pas bien avec nous? ».

« Taisez-vous ».

Dans un instant, il ferait tout à fait nuit. Le vent devenait plus aigre. Auguste, toujours immobile, regardait tourbillonner les brins de paille. L'inspecteur se releva. Il tapota la joue de Marcelle.

« Allons, dit-il, voilà qui est bon! ».

En même temps, il pensa que ce n'était pas bon du tout. Mais était-ce sa faute à lui? Il faisait tout ce qu'il pouvait. Où placer les enfants abandonnés, sinon ici? Qui en voulait, sinon des misérables comme ceux-ci, à qui on donnait pour cela quelques sous? Ce n'était pas les riches qui allaient s'encombrer de ces enfants du malheur, cette graine de bandits.

« Elle va à l'école? »

« Pour sûr! ».

« L'institutrice est gentille? ».

« Pour ça, oui. Celle-là, c'est une dévouée! ».

« Allons, c'est bon! ».

Comprenant que l'inspecteur allait partir, la vieille jeta vers Auguste un regard sournois: il était toujours là, dans l'ombre, muet, pareil à un tronc de chêne mort. Pour une fois qu'il n'était pas à l'auberge! Mais tant pis, ah, tant pis!

« Monsieur l'Inspecteur, dit-elle, en posant la main sur la tête de Marcelle, celle-ci a été malade, et le médecin... ».

« Paix, grande gueule! ».

La voix sauvage d'Auguste fit reculer les enfants. Il avan-

ça d'un pas, dans un gros bruit de sabots; ses bras pendaient lourdement le long de son corps. L'inspecteur se retourna brusquement.

« Et c'est maintenant que vous le dites? ».

La vieille joignit les mains. D'un ton pleurnicheur, qui rappelait celui des mendiants le jour du pardon de Saint-Yves, elle geignit:

« Oui, ah oui, bien malade, allez, et le médecin...

« Qu'est-ce qu'elle a eu? ».

Elle ne le savait pas, mais la petite était restée au lit pendant un mois et le médecin était venu souvent. La vieille tournait ses mains l'une dans l'autre, se penchait vers l'inspecteur, jetait de temps en temps un regard vers Auguste.

« Et j'ai payé... ».

« Tais-toi, sinon... ».

Auguste fit un pas, la main levée. Lentement, l'oeil de la vieille monta vers cette main, et une grimace hideuse fit grincer tous les plis de son visage, mais elle se tut, vaincue, et la main d'Auguste s'abaissa lentement.

« Qu'est-ce que ça signifie? murmura l'inspecteur. La petite a été malade, oui ou non? ».

Cette fois, ce fut Auguste qui répondit:

« Oui ».

« Et alors? ».

« Rien. Elle est guérie ».

L'inspecteur considéra cet homme étrange, qui avait l'air d'un vieillard, bien qu'il dût être encore assez jeune. Mais la guerre, la faim... et l'alcool...

« Vous avez payé quoi? ».

« Rien ».

« Cent soixante-quinze francs! Cent soixante-quinze! hurla la vieille, le pharmacien et tout... de l'argent de ma poche... et... ».

« Elle ment ».

Il faisait maintenant tout à fait nuit, et ils ne se voyaient plus les uns les autres que comme des ombres.

« Qui ment? ».

« Le médecin n'a pas voulu de nos sous, ni le pharmacien ».

La vieille poussa un cri long et perçant; la tête renversée, elle regarda le ciel tout noir et cria encore puis, les bras levés, elle courut d'une traite s'enfermer dans la maison. La porte claqua. Ils l'entendirent qui pleurait et criait des injures:

« Animal pourri! Ventre à vin! Cent soixante-quinze et pour une qui n'est pas ma fille seulement! De l'argent perdu! Et c'est toujours comme ça, il ne veut jamais qu'on demande. Ah, ce n'est pas les deux cent dix francs qu'on touche pour Marcelle qui me feront la garder. Saleté! Qu'on l'emmène! Pour sûr que ce n'est pas payé, cochons! Et sa pension, oh, Seigneur... ».

Auguste parut ne rien entendre. Quelle pitié! se dit l'Inspecteur, en pensant qu'il verrait à placer Marcelle ailleurs au plus tôt. Il s'en alla. Auguste grommela entre ses dents quelque chose que l'inspecteur ne comprit pas.

« A bientôt », dit l'inspecteur, qui regagna sa voiture laissée au bord de la route, une mauvaise route où le rocher affleurait partout.

La lumière des phares éblouit les enfants qui se cachèrent les yeux, et la voiture démarra. Dans la maison, la vieille criait toujours. Plus loin, les maisonnettes du village ressemblaient à un gros tas de charbon. Il bruinait et sur le chemin luisant, la lumière des phares une fois encore étincela, déjà lointaine.

Auguste se tourna vers les enfants:

« Rentrez, vous autres... ».

Lui, il monta à l'auberge.

L'auberge, à la fois boulangerie et mercerie, sentait le cidre et le pain chaud, il y faisait sombre et bon. Dans la cheminée bouillait un pot et l'éclat du feu faisait étinceler sur un dressoir le cuivre d'un casque allemand. Au plafond, de grands quartiers de lard gris pendaient parmi les sabots de buis et les balais suspendus aux poutres.

C'était l'auberge de la Céline. Là, deux vieillards étaient assis l'un en face de l'autre. D'un geste familier, Auguste se glissa le long d'un mur, enjamba un banc et s'assit en disant:

« Cognac ».

Les deux vieillards, leurs verres devant eux, la pipe aux dents, ne bougeaient ni ne parlaient. Derrière son comptoir, la Céline cousait en silence. Elle posa son ouvrage, se leva et apporta le cognac sans un mot.

L'un des vieillards se tourna vers Auguste:

« Fini? » demanda-t-il.

Auguste avala une gorgée de cognac. Oui, cette journée-ci était finie, *males Doué!* Plus il allait, plus les journées étaient longues et dures. S'il n'y avait pas eu ces quintes, au moins... Un petit rire contrit secoua le vieillard et ses yeux d'eau brillèrent comme du verre. Il ôta de sa bouche sa pipe noire en disant:

« Ah! damnés que nous sommes! ».

Dix francs l'hiver, quinze l'été, pour jour et nuit de travail, et plier devant les fermiers et tout le monde, pourrir de misère toute sa vie, et avec ça, les saisies.

« Vont-ils vendre Le Coz? ».

« Ils ne vendront pas, dit l'autre vieillard en ouvrant la main à plat sur la table ».

« Ils ne vendront pas! répliqua l'autre. Tu parles bien vite. Mais ils viendront avec une centaine de gendarmes, alors? ».

« Les gendarmes, on a déjà fait reculer les gendarmes, d'autres fois ».

« Les maudits! ».

Cette fois, il viendrait du monde de trente kilomètres à la ronde.

Un jeune gars entra, toucha du bout des doigts la visière de sa casquette, et vint prendre place près d'Auguste. Il demanda du café. La Céline posa son ouvrage, et apporta le café puis elle revint derrière son comptoir, reprit son aiguille et se remit à coudre.

« Et alors toi, mon gars? Du travail? ».

Le jeune gars n'avait pas envie de parler. Il haussa les épaules. Depuis qu'il était revenu du régiment, il n'avait rien trouvé à faire et il rôdait dans le pays, bricolait. Partir à la ville? Entrer dans la police, aux chemins de fer, au métro?

« On parlait de Le Coz, dit le vieux. Tu sais rien de neuf? Rien? C'est pas décidé encore? ».

« Oh, je crois qu'ils n'oseront pas. Ça ne serait qu'un cri dans le pays! », dit le jeune gars.

Il s'adossa au mur, la casquette sur le coin de l'oreille.

« Et ils n'ont que des menaces à nous faire. Même plus possible d'aller tirer les patates à Jersey! ».

« Ouais, mon fils, c'est fini pour nous, Jersey ».

La scène changea brusquement par l'irruption dans l'auberge de trois personnages qui apparurent comme trois personnages de comédie, à croire qu'ils faisaient partie d'une troupe de saltimbanques, égarés dans le pays. Le premier des trois, un solide gaillard râblé, à figure quasiment mongole, avait la tête ceinte d'une couronne de lauriers. C'était une couronne tout à fait semblable à celles que l'on donne aux enfants, à l'école, le jour de la distribution des prix. Il souriait, des yeux, de la bouche, semblait au comble de la jubilation, courbait légèrement le dos en marchant et balançait ses grands bras d'un air assez simiesque. Ce personnage pittoresque devait être bien connu de la Céline et des paysans attablés dans l'auberge, d'Auguste lui-même, car son apparition ne provoqua pas de leur part le moindre étonnement, pas plus que celle des deux acolytes qui le suivaient, dont l'un très grand et fort maigre, boitait des deux pieds, tandis que l'autre, petit, chafouin, espiègle, était un bossu, portant sous son coude une guitare.

Ils entrèrent sans dire un mot. Mais aussitôt qu'ils eurent pénétré jusqu'au milieu de la salle d'auberge, ils se mirent en position, c'est à dire que le bossu s'emparant de sa guitare, se mit à jouer les premières mesures d'un vieux chant celtique, tandis que le boiteux désignait à l'assistance l'homme à la couronne qui s'inclina, tour à tour, devant chacun des occupants de la pièce. Maître des cérémonies, in-

troducteur de ce prince, le boiteux annonça d'une voix tonitruante: Maxime d'Armor - Sauveur de la Poésie!

Aussitôt que le boiteux eut fait la présentation du grand couronné, celui-ci commanda à boire tandis que le bossu rejetait sa guitare sur sa bosse, que la Céline, toujours aussi silencieuse, se levait pour les servir, et que le boiteux se glissait le long d'un banc.

Habitués depuis longtemps aux extravagances de Maxime, ni la Céline, ni les paysans ne prenaient garde à lui, mais celui-ci força leur attention en tirant de son blouson une grande carte marine, que, d'un geste grandiose, il déroula sur la table. Aussitôt, les mains du bossu et celles du boiteux s'abattirent sur cette carte pour la maintenir à plat, les têtes se penchèrent et tous les yeux se braquèrent, y compris ceux de la Céline qui apportait la bouteille et les verres, sur un point désigné par Maxime d'un doigt napoléonien, tandis qu'il s'écriait toujours de la même voix formidable:

« C'est ici qu'est le trésor! ».

Et il semblait qu'il eut le trésor dans le creux de la main. Ce mot magique, ce geste impérial, amenèrent de petits rires flûtés sur les lèvres des paysans et firent briller les yeux de la Céline d'une étrange lueur qui les fit un instant paraître de la couleur même de l'or, puis, avec une moue, ayant achevé de remplir les verres, elle retourna à son ouvrage, d'une allure de bête châtiée. Les deux lieutenants de Maxime s'amusaient passionnément.

« Ici! » répéta Maxime, prenant la pose dans laquelle il s'était toujours vu pour sa future statue. « Un immense trésor! » reprit-il. Un trésor tout en pièces d'or à l'effigie de Louis-Philippe, sur la côte de la Guinée...

On aurait dit qu'il parlait comme dans une trompette, qu'il s'adressait au peuple accouru en foule sur une place pour l'entendre.

Puis, tout à coup, changeant de tactique, et se glissant sur le banc entre ses deux acolytes, il se mit à chuchoter, à promener ses doigts sur la carte; il sortit des papiers de sa poche, sembla consulter quelque vieux grimoire, réfléchir,

comparer, vérifier, calculer, avec des airs mystérieux et des paroles murmurées à l'oreille de l'un puis de l'autre, qui acquiesçaient ou déniaient avec des mines pleines de componction, et, aussi brusquement, comme une chose réglée d'avance, ils se levèrent tous les trois ensemble, la carte marine s'enroula toute seule, Maxime la prit sous son bras, comme une lunette d'amiral, et le bossu, saisissant sa guitare, ils se mirent tous les trois à chanter une vieille chanson de matelots quittant le port pour quelque lointaine et périlleuse expédition...

Au son de la musique, des enfants accoururent devant la porte, où ils restèrent. Bouche bée, les yeux écarquillés, ils regardaient, écoutaient, paralysés de surprise, de joie, d'admiration, si bien qu'ils ne s'aperçurent même pas de l'arrivée de trois nouveaux personnages qui les écartèrent doucement pour se faire un chemin et pénétrer dans l'auberge.

Loin de troubler Maxime d'Armor et ses lieutenants, leur apparition au contraire sembla leur donner un regain d'enthousiasme. Maxime n'en brailla que plus fort, le bossu n'en gratta que plus énergiquement sa guitare. Quant au boiteux, souriant d'une oreille à l'autre tout en continuant de chanter, il souleva son grand chapeau et s'inclina devant la compagnie, en parfait maître de cérémonies qu'il était.

Le groupe des nouveaux arrivants était composé d'une femme d'une quarantaine d'années, tout en noir, au visage dur sous de maigres cheveux blanchissants — l'institutrice du bourg — et de deux jeunes hommes, habillés comme des ouvriers. L'un d'eux, grand, souple, âgé de vingt-cinq ans environ, le cheveu très noir sous la casquette étoilée de mouchetures de plâtre, le regard ardent, le teint foncé, très beau, sûrement étranger, portait autour du cou un foulard rouge. Quant au troisième, c'était sûrement un homme de la région, mais pas un paysan. Petit, alerte, l'oeil vif.

Surpris par le spectacle, ils s'étaient arrêtés, n'osant pas s'asseoir avant que les chanteurs eussent terminé un couplet.

Or, au moment où le couplet terminé les deux lieutenants n'attendaient qu'un signe de leur maître pour passer au

second, celui-ci, d'un geste solennel, leur fit signe de rester tranquilles, puis, ôtant la guitare des mains du bossu, il s'avança vers le jeune ouvrier au foulard rouge et la lui tendit, en lui faisant signe que c'était à lui de s'en servir, et en s'inclinant, de manière à lui faire comprendre qu'il serait ravi, et tous les assistants aussi, s'il voulait bien accepter l'invitation qu'il lui faisait.

Le jeune ouvrier au foulard rouge, d'abord indécis, éclata d'un rire heureux et, acceptant la guitare, il se posa sur un bout de banc, croisa les jambes, et se pencha sur l'instrument. Pendant quelques instants, le plus parfait silence régna dans l'auberge. C'est sur la pointe des pieds que Maxime et ses lieutenants allèrent s'asseoir, de même que le second ouvrier et l'institutrice. La Céline elle-même ne bougea pas. Elle remit à plus tard de servir ses nouveaux clients et poussa même l'audace jusqu'à lever les yeux pour voir ce qui se passait. Les vieillards, ravis, souriaient et ouvraient des yeux aussi émerveillés que ceux des enfants restés devant la porte. Quant à Auguste, rien n'avait bougé dans son visage. Il semblait ne rien voir, ne rien savoir.

Le jeune ouvrier au foulard rouge, la tête penchée sur la guitare, en grattait doucement les cordes, écoutait, réfléchissait, semblait lui parler, puis, d'un coup, relevant le buste il se décida. L'Espagne! C'était l'Espagne! La chanson, qu'après quelques mesures brèves le jeune ouvrier avait entonnée devait être une chanson populaire faite pour les soirées d'été et mieux encore pour les nuits et, dans l'esprit du chanteur, toute chargée de souvenirs et de promesses. C'était cela, sans doute, qui donnait à son visage cette pâleur, et à son regard cet air absent. Il chantait d'une très belle voix, chaude et pleine, une voix amoureuse et virile, tantôt caressante, tantôt éclatante de passion, puis, se brisant dans des cascades de sanglots comme dans les supplications des *saetas*, accompagnés à la guitare par des roulades presque éteintes, une sorte de grésillement en sourdine qui faisait penser aux cigales...

La beauté du chant, l'attitude du chanteur, l'étrangeté

de cette présence au fond de cette petite auberge, en Bretagne, tout ce qu'on pouvait imaginer concernant la personne de cet Espagnol et sur les raisons qui l'avaient amené si loin de son pays, donnaient à la réalité son véritable caractère par où elle atteignait au symbole. Oui, c'était l'Espagne, mais l'Espagne proscrite, l'Espagne ouvrière et rebelle momentanément battue à Oviédo et à Barcelone. Et ce jeune ouvrier en était l'image même. Il ne pouvait y avoir de doute: c'était un insurgé, quelque réfugié politique venu là par quelle suite de hasards... Mais tout réfugié politique qu'il fût, c'était une vieille chanson populaire qu'il avait choisie, où il ne devait être question que de beauté, d'amour heureux ou malheureux, là n'était pas la question, une chanson de la patrie perdue...

Tous l'écoutaient religieusement, sensibles non seulement à la beauté de la chose, mais comme comprenant les intimes pensées du jeune homme, et, dans un respect égal à celui qu'il montrait lui-même envers le sacré des choses, tenant, au moins par l'attitude et par le silence à lui montrer qu'on le comprenait dans son épreuve et dans sa fierté. Aussi, quand il se tut, et quand, après un moment de silence il se leva pour rendre la guitare à Maxime, personne n'insista pour qu'il chantât encore.

Pour une fois, Maxime lui-même, vaincu par la grandeur de ce qui venait de se passer, sembla embarrassé de sa couronne, et c'est avec une vraie humilité que, sans un mot, il reprit la guitare, et la tendit au bossu, qui l'accepta d'un air piteux. C'est qu'il avait plus d'esprit que son collègue le boiteux, lequel, jugeant que c'était bien l'occasion pour lui de parler, se mit à dire que des guitaristes et des chanteurs espagnols, il en avait entendu des charibotées surtout au Lapin Agile, mais qu'un comme celui-là, minute! Point! Jamais de la vie.

Grâce à Dieu, le refugié espagnol n'entendait pas un mot de français. C'était ce que l'institutrice était en train d'expliquer, ajoutant que si on l'avait envoyé ici, ce n'était pas du tout par hasard, mais en raison de certaines mesures de police qui avaient pour but d'éloigner le plus possible les

réfugiés politiques de leur frontière d'une part, de la région parisienne de l'autre, et de faire en sorte également que les Basques ne fussent pas trop répandus en Bretagne où l'on craignait qu'ils prissent contact avec les autonomistes, comme si, à part une ou deux douzaines de curés et d'intellectuels, il y avait eu des autonomistes en Bretagne. Mais celui-ci était d'Oviedo. Il s'appelait Sirio. Il avait vingt-huit ans. Il appartenait à la F.A.I., c'est-à-dire qu'il était anarchiste et, de son métier, maçon. On lui avait trouvé du travail chez un entrepreneur sympathisant et, pour le moment, il était occupé avec l'autre copain, Rolik, un type du parti, à des réparations dans un château voisin.

Cependant, Maxime ayant commandé une tournée générale, la Céline se leva pour apporter une bouteille et des verres et la scène changea encore une fois. Tout s'anima de nouveau, le boiteux et le bossu retrouvèrent leur disponibilité, bien que, dans l'attitude du bossu, il restât quelque chose indiquant qu'il eût volontiers accueilli un miracle pour dissimuler la guitare.

Maxime rajusta sa couronne, parla de déclamer un poème, mais y renonça. Quant à Rolik, qui n'avait soufflé mot jusqu'à présent, il semblait résolu à ne point changer d'attitude, mais son regard d'écureuil intelligent observait tout, enregistrait tout, et, quand il se posait sur Maxime et ses lieutenants, ne témoignait d'aucune bienveillance. Assurément, il les considérait comme des ennemis.

Les vieux paysans riaient silencieusement, ravis de tout et de l'aubaine d'un verre à boire. Auguste était toujours là, le même, aveugle et sourd, étranger et comme prêt s'endormir.

Maxime leva son verre et le souleva, le porta à la hauteur de sa couronne, et l'institutrice, prenant le bras de Rolik lui chuchota à l'oreille : « Pourvu qu'il ne se livre pas à quelque extravagance ! Sirio ne le supporterait pas et nous devons veiller sur lui ! Rolik ! fit-elle doucement, en attirant vers elle le jeune militant, prenons garde à ce que va dire Maxime, surveille Sirio ! ». Elle redoutait que Maxime n'improvisât quelque dithyrambe sur l'Espagne, où malgré son peu de con-

naissance du français Sirio pourrait trouver matière à un accès de susceptibilité qui pourrait donner matière à une histoire où la police qui ne demandait pas mieux viendrait fourrer son nez.

Il n'en fut rien heureusement. Maxime se contenta de lever son verre à l'éternelle Espagne de Don Quichotte et à promettre pour un jour prochain un hymne aux martyrs d'Oviedo, paroles que Sirio accepta avec la plus grande dignité du monde. Et là-dessus, on se sépara, c'est-à-dire que Maxime, ayant jeté de l'argent sur la table fit signe à ses lieutenants et ils quittèrent l'endroit, pressés d'aller jouer de la guitare ailleurs et de reparler du trésor...

A peine étaient-ils partis depuis quelques instants qu'on entendit du bruit au dehors.

— « Gri... Oh là Gri-i-i oh! ». Une lourde charrette dont ils entrevirent la lanterne s'arrêta en grinçant devant l'auberge. L'homme n'entra pas encore. Il parlait à ses bêtes, passait la chaîne dans la roue; les graviers de la route crissaient sous ses gros sabots.

« Ça doit être Hervé, dit le vieux, c'est son heure ».

C'était Hervé, en effet, un homme grand, tout en velours blanc, dont les yeux noirs se tiraient vers les tempes.

« C'est fait », dit-il, en entrant. « On vend Le Coz ».

La Céline elle-même cette fois dressa l'oreille. Et, tout en commandant à la Céline de lui apporter un rhum, Hervé se glissa le long du banc et s'assit. Les deux vieux se rapprochèrent. Auguste paraissait absent, — tassé, presque affalé sur la table, le menton dans les bras croisés.

« Hier, l'huissier est venu chez Le Coz », dit Hervé. « La vente est décidée pour dans huit jours ».

Personne ne dit mot. La Céline apporta le rhum. Sans rien dire et après avoir bu une gorgée, il dit en se tournant vers Jules:

« C'est toi surtout que je cherchais. Je t'ai trouvé de l'occupation — oh! pas payée, se hâta-t-il d'ajouter, croyant avoir donné un faux espoir au jeune homme. Mais du travail sérieux quand même ».

« Bon. Qu'est-ce que c'est? ».

« Tout à l'heure, fit Hervé; puis il reprit: L'huissier avait peur de Le Coz. Il est arrivé chez lui avec son fusil, comme s'il allait à la chasse! ».

Ils s'exclamèrent. Ça passait les bornes! Hervé haussa les épaules — ça n'était pas pire du temps des rois, dit-il. Et il lampa son verre.

« Dites partout que la vente est décidée, fit-il en se levant. Il nous faut le plus de monde possible ». Il jeta de la monnaie sur la table, et hochant la tête en regardant Jules: « Viens ». Et les deux hommes sortirent. La nuit était pleine de vent et de crachin. Les cirés, sur le dos des bêtes, luisaient dans l'ombre à l'éclat diffus de la lanterne accrochée au brancard de la charrette.

Hervé baissa la voix.

« La dernière fois, chez Le Roux, tu te rappelles? Les gendarmes ont cogné. Nous, on ne croyait pas que ça serait comme ça. Ils en ont arrêtés deux qu'ils ont emmenés en auto. Ça ne va pas recommencer? S'ils cognent, nous cognerons, mais il faut savoir avec quoi. D'ici vendredi, tu vas me couper des triques ».

« Bon ».

« Le plus que tu pourras. Jeudi, je viendrai charger ça dans ma charrette. On les cachera sous le paille et j'amènerai la charrette tout près de chez Le Coz ».

« Combien? ».

« On était trois cents chez Le Gac, au moins quatre cents chez Leroux ».

« Bon ».

« Ils viendront en auto. Il faudra s'arranger pour accidenter la route vendredi matin. Je te verrai avant ».

« Bon ».

Hervé saisit les chevaux par la bride et la lourde charrette s'ébranla. Jules s'en alla de son côté.

Dans l'auberge, les deux vieillards se préparaient à sortir. Ils payèrent, gagnèrent la route. Auguste resta seul et commanda un cognac.

Il fallait profiter qu'il lui restait encore quelques sous, car la Céline, une si vieille connaissance pourtant, ne lui ferait pas grâce d'un petit verre le jour où il n'aurait plus rien. Elle le prendrait par les épaules et le jetterait dehors...

Dans la masure, la vieille et les enfants étaient rassemblés. Le feu de chènevotte, dans la cheminée, éclairait de lueurs roses et dansantes la chaux écaillée des murs. Penchée sur une marmite, son ombre mouvante au plafond, la vieille marmonnait: « La nuit est arrivée sur vous, et voilà! Courir, c'est tout ce que vous savez faire, courir nuit et jour!... ».

Les plus petits, assis devant le feu, silencieux, fascinés, attendaient leur pitance. Annette allait et venait, préparait le bois pour la nuit. Le vent sifflait. La vieille se redressa, jeta autour d'elle un regard d'aveugle et poussa un profond soupir.

« Cochons, oh, Seigneur! ».

Les garçons étaient rentrés depuis longtemps; assis par terre, ils s'occupaient, l'un à fumer sa pipe, l'autre à tailler une canne dans une branche de châtaignier. Franchik le marin songeait à Terre-Neuve, à l'Islande. Il irait au château, il parlerait à Madame, qui le prendrait à bord de son yacht. Ce serait fini d'entendre les criailleries de la mère, de recevoir et de rendre des coups, de mettre la paix dans le ménage. Son demi-frère, le gros Erwan, de deux ans son cadet, taillait son bout de bois en souriant. Il n'avait par faim, mais il mangerait tout de même. Les autres tout à l'heure allaient à grands cris réclamer leur souper, et il ferait comme eux. Pourtant, l'après-midi, il était allé se cacher dans un coin connu de lui seul, dans la forêt des Chênes et là, entre trois pierres, il avait allumé un feu. Ayant sorti d'une cachette un vieux plat de fer et de la graisse, il avait fait cuire des pommes de terre.

« Oh! Fainéants! » soupira la vieille.

Assise dans un coin, toute seule, Marcelle songeait au Monsieur. Pourquoi était-il venu? Et pourquoi la vieille avait-elle crié si fort? La voix grondeuse de la vieille s'éleva de nouveau:

« Où est encore le voyou d'ici? ».

Franchik haussa les épaules, en secouant sa pipe. Où? Ne savait-elle donc pas où il était?

« A l'auberge! ».

« A l'auberge! » répéta la vieille, un bras plongé dans un sac de son. « Toujours à l'auberge! Puisse-t-il y crever! Annette! ».

« Oui, la mère... ».

« Ecrase les betteraves pour le cochon ».

« L'heure du cochon est passée depuis longtemps », ricana le gros Erwan. « Partout on leur a donné à souper avant la nuit. Il n'y a que toi pour faire manger les bêtes aussi tard. Et pour nous, c'est la même chose ».

« Museau de chien! » s'écria la vieille, la main levée.

Erwan rit aux éclats. Elle le laissa tranquille, et se mit elle-même à écraser des betteraves, puis, les betteraves écrasées, elle les jeta dans un seau et sortit. Franchik se leva, fit quelques pas dans la pièce. Quel beau yacht ce devait être que celui de Madame. Un yacht tout blanc, le *Saint-Yves.*

Les tout-petits avaient l'air de sommeiller devant le feu que surveillait Marcelle. Avec deux grosses bûches et un peu de chènevotte, il tiendrait encore longtemps.

Marcelle trancha le lien d'un fagot d'ajoncs qu'elle jeta dans le foyer; les ajoncs en brûlant jetèrent de hautes flammes craquantes, et le vent refoula dans la pièce un brouillard de fumée qui fit reculer les enfants.

« Ecoute », dit Annette, en tirant Franchik par la manche, « un homme est venu... Un Monsieur. C'est à cause de Marcelle. La mère a crié, tu sais. Ne sors pas ce soir... ».

Il rit tout bas, et la vieille rentra, posa le seau vide par terre et s'assit sur un banc. Pour la première fois de la journée, elle demeura silencieuse, les bras pendants, la tête penchée. Dormait-elle? Franchik l'observa du coin de l'oeil.

« Alors, quoi, la mère, tu rêves? Donne à manger ».

« Quoi? ».

« J'ai faim ».

« Faim? Ah, *Males Doué!* Annette, apporte le chaudron! ».

Annette écarta les petits, et se penchant sur le foyer, elle en retira le chaudron qu'elle posa par terre. Ils vinrent tous s'accroupir autour et le repas commença.

Personne ne disait mot. Ils mangeaient, écoutant le vent; chacun, petits et grands, pêchait sa pitance dans le chaudron, au hasard. Marcelle apporta de la piquette dans une cruche et des bols.

« Pas de lard? ».

Franchik en avait assez de ne rien manger que des pommes de terre. D'un bout de l'année à l'autre, c'était la même chose: des pommes de terre et du pain noir, du café, et l'été parfois un morceau de boeuf.

« Et d'où veux-tu, terre-neuvas maudit? D'où veux-tu? » répliqua la vieille, la bouche pleine. « Le cochon de l'année dernière, il est mangé depuis longtemps... Si l'autre cochon ne buvait pas à l'auberge tout ce qu'il gagne, continua-t-elle après avoir avalé sa bouchée, s'il avait fait tout ce qu'il fallait pour toucher sa pension de guerre, s'il ne m'avait pas empêchée, la charogne, de toucher l'argent pour Marcelle. Mais il ne veut rien recevoir, rien, oh! la gueule de mort... ».

« Assez, la mère. Tu dis des bêtises ».

« Morveux! Des bêtises!... Oh, Seigneur! Vous êtes tous les mêmes, des bons à rien, Annette! ».

« Oui, la mère? ».

« Eh bien, couche les petits! ».

Annette et Marcelle s'empressèrent de déshabiller les petits qui dormaient debout. Ils couchaient dans des caisses, devant la cheminée. Erwan et Franchik dormaient dans la grange. Annette et Marcelle au grenier. Seule, la vieille et Auguste avaient ici leur paillasse.

La vieille s'était appuyée au mur, les jambes allongées par terre, les deux mains dans son giron:

« Et les prières? » dit-elle.

Mais Franchik la nargua — et, sans le regarder, elle l'injuria:

« Terre-neuvas damné qui ne croit pas en Dieu! ».

Le vent entourait la masure de son tumulte. « Tu périras, reprit la vieille, pour sûr!... ».

Franchik haussa les épaules. La vieille se mit à prier d'une voix sourde, sans regarder personne, sans bouger, les mains vagues dans son giron.

Ma Doué, ma gred fermamant
Penaos ez oc'h aman presant.

Ensuite, vinrent le Pater et l'Ave, le Je crois en Dieu, le Confiteor, l'acte de foi, d'espérance et de charité. Puis la prière des morts.

De profundis clamavi ad te, Domine
Domine, exaudi vocem meam...

Le gros Erwan, repu, dormait. Annette et Marcelle achevaient de coucher les petits.

La porte en s'ouvrant laissa passer le vent glacial et Auguste apparut, la tête basse, sous le chapeau de travers, la moustache humide, les regardant sans les voir. Enfin, il entra, laissant battre derrière lui la porte qu'Annette alla fermer, puis elle revint au foyer et prit l'écuelle de soupe mise là au chaud, et la porta sur la table.

La vieille ricana. N'eut-il tenu qu'à elle, Auguste aurait bien pu crever de faim, pour sûr! Ce n'était pas elle qui se serait dérangée pour lui apporter sa soupe! A peine avait-elle levé un regard sur Auguste. Celui-ci, d'un air harassé, se glissa le long du banc entre la table et le mur et s'assit. Sa main tâtonnante chercha la cuiller, plongée dans l'écuelle.

Il la trouva, comme un aveugle, mais il ne se mit pas encore à manger. Il semblait écouter quelque chose, le vent peut-être, qui creusait de grands remous dans les feuillages des arbres voisins, et s'engouffrant dans la cheminée remplissait la pièce de fumée.

Assis par terre, la tête entre ses mains, Franchik réfléchissait tout en surveillant la vieille; le gros Erwan dormait toujours. Sans rien dire, Marcelle, effrayée, s'était rapprochée d'Annette. Personne ne parlait. Auguste se décida enfin

à manger; il se mit à avaler sa soupe à grandes cuillerées, levant haut les sourcils à chaque fois qu'il approchait la cuiller de sa bouche. Il n'était pas plus ivre que d'habitude.

Toujours assise par terre, le dos appuyé au mur et les jambes allongées, la vieille dodelinait de la tête. Elle se parlait elle-même, presque tout bas. C'était comme un grognement sourd, un gémissement de litanie, une plainte qui montait:

« Bête pourrie! Tu es encore resté rouler l'auberge! Tout ce que tu gagnes, tu le bois, pied de banc d'hôtellerie! Oh, toi, tiens, ce serait pain béni de te jeter dans la rivière! Le pain et tout ce n'est pas toi qui le gagnes, cochon, pas avec tes sous, charogne! Pourvu que tu en aies plein le ventre de vin! ».

Auguste n'entendait rien, ne voyait rien. Il avalait sa soupe. Annette et Franchik échangèrent un regard. La plainte de la vieille continuait sur un ton qui montait toujours:

« Depuis que tu es ici je n'ai que de la pénitence avec toi. Gueule à lavasse! Et dire que tu pourrais avoir une pension de guerre et que tu ne l'as pas voulu! Et toucher de l'argent pour celle-ci, voilà que tu m'en as empêchée tout à l'heure », s'écria-t-elle en se levant. « Malédiction noire! » hurla-t-elle, en bousculant Franchik qui voulait la retenir. Penchée sur la table, la vieille frappa Auguste sur la tête. Son chapeau tomba, et voulant le rattraper, il faillit renverser son écuelle.

« Non! Non! Je ne veux pas! » cria Marcelle, en accourant se blottir près d'Annette.

« Emmène-la! Vite! dit Franchik. Allez toutes les deux dans la grange ».

Il les poussa dehors, referma la porte d'un coup de sabot, il se tourna vers la vieille, qui continuait à cogner, il la prit par la peau du cou et l'entraîna en la menaçant:

« Assez, ou gare!... ».

Les deux fillettes s'enfuirent dans la nuit noire à travers le courtil et coururent se cacher dans la grange. Elles s'assirent sur des fagots, blotties l'une contre l'autre.

Dans la maison, les cris redoublèrent:

« Oh, toi, animal vil! ».

La voix de Franchik leur arriva, ordonnant à la vieille de se taire et de rester tranquille. Un objet tomba. Il sembla aux deux fillettes qu'on remuait la table ou le banc. Puis, elles n'entendirent plus rien.

« Va voir », chuchota Marcelle. « J'ai peur... ».

« Franchik est là, tu sais bien!... ».

Au loin, un hibou hulula, et ce cri leur rappela un autre hibou que Franchik avait recueilli il y avait déjà longtemps. Ils l'avaient gardé tout un mois. La nuit, il hululait; les chouettes et les hiboux qui hantaient les troncs creux du voisinage lui répondaient; leurs voix, lointaines, durant les premières nuits, s'étaient peu à peu rapprochées, puis, une fois, un hibou était venu se poser sur le toit même de la masure et dès lors, toutes les nuits, ils avaient entendu de longues plaintes, jusqu'au jour où le vent ayant arraché les tabatières, leur hibou s'était envolé...

Dans la masure, le bruit recommença, un objet de verre — sans doute une bouteille — se brisa. Puis, de nouveau le silence, et le vent. Du bas de la côte montait un grincement de branches emmêlées, le bruit de la rivière montait aussi.

La porte de la masure s'ouvrit et Franchik s'avançant dans le courtil leur cria:

« Allez-vous coucher: c'est fini ».

Elles grimpèrent l'échelle pour monter dans le grenier où elles dormaient sur des couettes de balle, dans l'odeur fade de la farine, des sacs de blé et des pommes, et se déshabillèrent dans la nuit. Le bruit de la rivière montait toujours, parfois c'était comme un bruit de colère et, parfois, comme des chuchotements et des chansons par-dessous la voix immense du vent qui passait, défaisait et emportait tout la nuit, et hier, et aujourd'hui, qui n'étaient qu'une même pierre sur le coeur. C'était la paix jusqu'à demain.

JEANNE TERRACINI

MARIE

Enfant, Marie n'avait pas de goût à l'étude: elle pensait à autre chose pendant que la maîtresse expliquait la leçon. Quand on l'interrogeait, elle restait coite. Elle ne savait même pas de quoi il s'agissait. Elle regardait les objets qui l'entouraient, la classe, ses camarades, la maîtresse et elle se disait: « tout cela pourrait être autrement ». Ou bien elle s'étonnait du ciel bleu et pensait: « Les autres aussi disent 'le ciel est bleu' mais ce bleu que je vois est-il pareil au bleu que voient les autres? »

Impossible de demander cela à la maîtresse sans déclencher le fou-rire de toute la classe. Impossible de dire: « Ce que l'on voit est-ce vraiment ce qui est? »

A l'occasion de son anniversaire, Marie reçut de sa marraine un kaléidoscope et, passé quatre heures, au lieu d'étudier ses leçons elle s'absorbait dans la contemplation des dessins magiques qui changeaient au moindre mouvement.

— Elle n'est pas douée pour les études, constatait la mère. Elle n'a pas la tête à cela. Que faire?

On la retira donc de l'école après que la maîtresse elle-même eut affirmé qu'elle y perdait son temps.

— Ce n'est pas qu'elle soit turbulente ou même stupide, mais il lui est impossible de fixer son attention sur un sujet précis. Elle entend mais n'écoute pas. Et puis elle n'accepte

pas les conventions sans lesquelles le monde serait inintelligible. Alors, il vaut mieux ne pas insister.

Marie fut délivrée de l'école et en ressentit un grand soulagement.

A la maison l'enchaînement des besognes ménagères n'empêchait pas la poursuite de ses rêves. La casserole se transformait sous ses yeux sans nuire à la soupe. Elle parlait peu et on ne s'en étonnait pas. Ses frères et sœurs l'avaient surnommée l'endormie; parfois au milieu de son travail elle s'arrêtait, regardait ses mains, les tournait, les posait à plat sur la table et captivée par ce spectacle, elle oubliait ses tâches les plus urgentes et laissait passer l'heure. Manifestement il lui manquait ce quelque chose qui permettait aux autres de trouver naturel qu'une table soit une table. Elle préférait ce monde en caoutchouc qui s'étirait ou se rapetissait à son commandement. Un jour, par hasard, elle aperçut son image reflétée dans le miroir au-dessus de la commode. Elle sortit et appela:

— Maman, viens, il y a quelqu'un dans ma chambre.

Et placée devant la commode elle dit l'index tendu:

— Là, qui est-ce?

— Comment, dit la mère abasourdie. Mais ce quelqu'un c'est toi! Voyons, Marie...

Marie stupéfaite et méfiante s'approcha du miroir:

— Moi? dit-elle. C'est impossible.

On dut enlever le miroir.

Sa mère pensait et souhaitait qu'à dix-huit ans un fiancé la réveillerait et la déniaiserait. Elle jeta son dévolu sur Marcel, un garçon robuste et sain qui fréquentait la maison depuis l'enfance. Marcel et Marie restaient ensemble dans le petit salon. Marcel, en sportif, parlait des champions et des championnats. Il avait un teint rouge, un front blanc, lumineux et des cheveux d'une extraordinaire noirceur dont les longues mèches semblaient animées d'une vie particulière. Marie les touchait et ne se lassait pas de constater combien elles étaient soyeuses et lourdes: l'odeur qui se dégageait de cette tête lui donnait un plaisir singulier.

— C'est donc cela que l'on appelle amour? se demandait-elle en enfonçant ses doigts dans la tiédeur de la chevelure. Marcel troublé, oubliait les as de la route et du foot-ball. Marie explorait un monde nouveau plus ductile que celui des métamorphoses enfantines.

Elle était fascinée, muette et ravie.

Marcel, en brave enfant, la trouvait un peu bizarre et même il était assez déconcerté par cette très jeune fille qui le palpait les yeux clos en aveugle.

Il se demandait qui lui en avait tant appris et se vexait malgré son plaisir. Les fiancés se taisent et personne ne s'en émeut. La mère de Marie était pleine d'espérance et pour rien au monde elle n'aurait dérangé les amoureux, ces innocents. Enfin, Marie allait naître à la vraie vie.

Un soir, Marcel qui avait tout le sérieux des gens qui vivent le réel, la baisa.

Il saurait bien si Marie était pure ou vicieuse. Elle s'effraya, il insista. Elle voulut appeler, crier, mais il était le plus fort, lui, Marcel, qui faisait de l'entraînement au stade après l'atelier. Il l'étreignit et elle sentit qu'on la précipitait vertigineusement dans le vide. Elle essayait de s'agripper: en vain.

« Ce doit être cela la mort ». Ce n'était que l'amour.

Quand Marcel se releva, il dit d'un ton piteux:

— Marie, je t'ai souillée.

Elle se sauva bouleversée et courut s'enfermer dans sa chambre. Le lendemain elle dit à sa mère qu'elle ne voulait plus voir Marcel et elle lui renvoya la petite bague bleue qu'il lui avait donnée. Marcel n'y comprenait rien.

— Ça alors, se répétait-il décontenancé. Ça alors!

Bientôt il se fit une raison, puisque c'est ça la vie.

On s'entête, on souffre tant que l'on peut et puis on oublie, parce qu'on continue.

L'ancien Marcel fit place à un nouveau Marcel qui était toujours un garçon décidé, allant vers ce qui lui était nécessaire avec la sûreté de l'instinct.

Marie n'oubliait pas: elle était blessée. Elle n'aurait plus

reconnu Marcel, ni les circonstances de son drame. Elle était la survivante d'un tremblement de terre. Patiemment elle reconstruisait avec des pierres disparates un monde qui remplacerait celui que Marcel avait fait s'écrouler.

Toujours les mêmes distractions et ce silence résigné devant lequel hésitaient les plus audacieux. Cette fille inquiétante qui ne faisait pas de bruit en marchant et souriait à tous d'un air absent, poursuivait ce que les autres appelaient le fantastique. Elle avait dit à sa mère avec beaucoup de fermeté:

— Je ne veux pas me marier, je ne veux pas sortir dans la rue, je ne veux voir personne. Je veux rester à la maison où je t'aiderai, compte sur moi.

— Compte sur moi, bougonna la mère. C'est vite dit. Tu es dans la lune la plupart du temps, tu n'entends pas quand on te parle...

— Dans la lune, répliqua Marie étonnée. Non, tu te trompes. Je serai sage, je ferai attention et je me souviendrai de ce qu'il faut faire. Mais je ne veux pas que l'on m'interroge et je parlerai juste ce qu'il faut pour ne pas oublier les mots. Je dirai la table pour la table et la chaise pour la chaise; sois sans crainte. Alors, tu me gardes?

— Comment si je te garde? Mais où donc voudrais-tu aller? dit la mère effrayée.

— Je ne sais pas. On dit qu'il existe des maisons pour les gens comme moi; des maisons de silence où l'on ne fait rien tout le jour et où l'on est heureux... Mais j'aime à m'occuper ici: le jardin et la maison m'ont acceptée. Je resterai donc puisque tu le veux bien, à condition que l'on me laisse en paix.

Ce discours si long avait effaré la mère qui dans l'après-midi s'en fut trouver une de ses plus anciennes connaissances, femme mûre comme elle et de bon conseil.

— Ce que tu me racontes est inquiétant, dit Clotilde, l'amie, et si tu dis que Marie a parlé de la sorte, c'est qu'elle est anormale. Mais dis-moi, ses fiançailles avec Marcel, la rupture...

Il en coûtait à la mère d'évoquer cette énigme. Elle éclata en sanglots et raconta tout ce qu'elle savait, dit ses espoirs et sa déception, mais ne parla pas de l'essentiel puisqu'elle ignorait ce qui s'était passé dans le petit salon.

— Il serait très important de savoir si elle est vierge, dit Clotilde en femme positive.

— Elle est vierge! rebattit la mère en rougissant. Il lui semblait déflorer sa fille en prononçant ces mots.

Les deux femmes qui croyaient pouvoir tout comprendre, ne comprirent rien du tout et commirent de concert une très grave erreur.

Clotilde, curieuse malgré ses cinquante-cinq ans, ou peut-être à cause de ses cinquante-cinq ans, de cette curiosité dangereuse, absolument déshumanisée, inventa un stratagème pour aller habiter auprès de Marie pendant le temps qu'elle jugeait nécessaire à la guérison.

Cette présence insolite hérissa l'échine de Marie. L'amabilité et l'empressement feints de Clotilde la dépouillèrent et provoquèrent une angoisse qui la terrassa.

« Elle ment! » se disait-elle en l'écoutant, car personne ne pouvait fermer son oreille et son entendement à la voix perçante de Clotilde.

« Elle ment! » Et Marie par un prodigieux effort repoussa cet être mielleux et insinuant qui pensait qu'en trois jours et par de subtils prétextes elle saurait de quoi il retournait.

Les trois jours passés, les deux femmes se retrouvèrent au salon, perplexes; l'une désappointée, l'autre anxieuse et triste jusqu'à l'âme.

— Je lui ai parlé doucement, avec compréhension, je l'ai rudoyée, je lui ai fait peur: rien. Est-elle mystique? interrogea Clotilde qui cherchait à tout prix une explication.

— J'y ai pensé aussi, répondit la mère d'une voix dolente. Et j'aurais bien voulu qu'elle le fût; mais non, ce n'est pas cela, pas cela du tout.

— Mais quoi alors? répliqua Clotilde irritée. Quoi donc pourrait captiver cette enfant à ce point, sinon le surnaturel?

Hélas, il ne s'agissait pas de ce surnaturel-là.

Dans la nuit, Marie entra dans la chambre de sa mère, alluma la veilleuse près du lit, regarda un instant dormir l'infortunée mère puis se décida à l'éveiller.

— Pardonne-moi, dit-elle; mais rien qu'un moment. Je suis très fatiguée moi-même et ne peux m'endormir. Clotilde va-t-elle rester longtemps chez nous?

— Quelle question? fit la mère interloquée, et tu viens me réveiller à deux heures du matin pour me demander cela?

Comme il y avait de l'irritation dans sa voix, Marie tendit la main en signe d'apaisement.

— Je n'arrive pas à te voir seule de toute la journée puisqu'elle t'accompagne partout, et j'ai dû attendre la nuit profonde pour être sûre qu'elle ne me dérangerait pas.

Et d'une voix calme elle répéta:

— Combien de temps compte-t-elle encore rester parmi nous?

— Pourquoi, elle te gêne?

— Oui, répondit Marie avec candeur. Elle fausse tout par sa seule présence et je désirerais qu'elle s'en aille au plus tôt.

Cela était dit sur un tel ton de fermeté et de conviction que la mère en fut ébranlée. Elle examina sa fille: celle-ci par respect baissa ses paupières et la mère malgré son trouble admira ce très beau visage.

« Au moins elle sait ce qu'elle veut », se dit-elle reprenant espoir.

— Bon, eh bien je m'arrangerai pour avancer son départ, dit-elle avec bonté. Mais toi, ma chérie, pourquoi me fais-tu tant souffrir? Pourquoi ne te comportes-tu pas comme mes autres enfants, comme tout le monde?

Le visage de Marie prit une expression si effarée que la mère ajouta vivement:

— Va, va te coucher maintenant et dors bien.

Si la fille s'en retourna dans sa chambre apaisée par la promesse de sa mère, cette dernière, de son côté, ne put se rendormir.

On eût dit que les paroles si simples de sa fille lui eussent révélé les traits véritables du caractère de Clotilde.

— C'est extraordinaire, se disait-elle. Voilà près de quarante ans que je fréquente Clotilde et c'est la première fois que je vois la femme qu'elle est. Egoïste, perfide, curieuse et sans-gêne. Je n'ai sûrement pas servi mon enfant en faisant appel à cette bavarde.

La rigueur de son propre jugement blessait la sensibilité si vive de la mère.

— Seigneur, priait-elle, gardez-nous de juger notre prochain...

Trop tard: une fois que l'on a jugé, il n'y a plus rien à faire.

Clotilde était trop fine mouche pour ne pas comprendre que la confiance de son amie défaillait.

— Tu m'en veux parce que j'ai échoué. Je te comprends. Est-il tellement nécessaire que je prolonge ma visite?

La mère protesta pour la forme. Clotilde essaya de s'élever au-dessus des contingences et la mère lui en sut gré, car elles appartenaient toutes deux à une génération imbue de politesse chinoise qui veut que l'on sourie en toutes circonstances.

Elles sourirent donc, mais se séparèrent pour ne plus jamais se revoir.

— La petite est folle et la mère n'en vaut guère mieux, racontait Clotilde dans les salons de la petite ville où l'on se passionnait pour les anomalies.

Marie remercia chaleureusement sa mère et retourna à sa fenêtre où elle resta immobile longtemps.

— Que fais-tu? demanda la mère à la fin.

— Je tisse, répondit doucement Marie.

Pour la première fois dans le cours de leurs rapports, la mère ne répliqua pas, dans l'intention de remettre les choses en place.

Alors Marie se retourna, courut vers elle, tomba à genoux sur le parquet, enfouit sa tête dans les grosses mains oisives de la mère et sanglota de joie.

— Tu comprends, maman, n'est-ce pas que tu comprends?

La mère était effarée. Elle savait qu'elle avait compris en un éclair, mais elle ne se souvenait pas de ce qu'elle avait compris. Un peu impatientée elle dit:

— Allons relève-toi Marie. Tu t'exaltes. Nous avons tant d'ouvrage sur les bras. Tu es une enfant, une enfant...

Marie se tut et reprit sa couture.

Cette nuit-là elle rêva et se souvint de son rêve.

Et ce fut ainsi toutes, toutes les autres nuits. Ce qui se passait autour d'elle ne l'intéressait pas. Parfois elle était frappée en reconnaissant dans les objets qui l'entouraient des éléments de ses rêves. Elle les prenait dans sa main et pensait: ce n'est pas tout à fait comme cela qu'ils sont; ils sont différents, moins froids, plus intimes.

Et elle les reposait à leur place, bouleversée.

Ses frères, ses sœurs, se marièrent. Le père mourut. Il y eut des neveux et des nièces. La mère vieillissait, chargée de soucis, de maux, de tristesse.

Elle était presque impotente et comme les vieillards, elle attendait la tombée du jour pour aller s'asseoir près de la fenêtre et profiter des dernières clartés.

Marie pourvoyait à tout.

Depuis la mort du père, la situation financière des deux femmes avait changé. Elles étaient devenues pauvres et il fallait se priver. Le malheur avait affaibli l'énergie de la mère qui pleurait avec ceux qui venaient la voir.

Le passé, le sentiment d'un bonheur enfui avant qu'elle en eût conscience, lui serraient la gorge si fort que si elle n'avait pas pleuré, elle serait morte étouffée.

— Je vis pour elle, disait-elle aux autres. Je vis pour Marie, pour la protéger et la défendre. Que deviendra-t-elle lorsque je disparaîtrai.

Périodiquement les frères et les sœurs promettaient en phrases solennelles qu'ils s'en occuperaient, qu'ils ne l'abandonneraient pas, mais l'impatience et l'ironie imprégnaient leurs déclarations.

— On lui a toujours tout passé, c'est pour cela qu'elle en est arrivée là. Gronde-la, voyons, secoue-la. Tu vois bien qu'elle exagère, qu'elle profite de ta faiblesse. Veux-tu que je lui parle, proposait Michel le cadet. Qu'elle apprenne un métier. Que lui manque-t-il pour gagner sa vie comme tout le monde!

— Moi vivante, cela ne sera pas, disait la mère et elle ajoutait tristement: Je sais bien, allez, que vous ne pourrez pas être patients comme je le suis.

Charles, l'aîné des frères, tenta de sermonner Marie et n'ayant obtenu aucune réaction il dit:

— Elle est têtue comme une mule. C'est un cas médical, elle relève de la psychiatrie. Le refus du réel, c'est connu ça...

— Qu'a-t-elle répondu? demanda la mère.

— Rien, dit Charles. Elle a fermé les yeux et c'est tout...

— Elle ne sait presque plus parler en dehors des choses usuelles, murmura la mère. Son vocabulaire s'est réduit au strict minimum.

Marie avait choisi ses rêves: ils se suivaient, nuit après nuit, ils se reliaient les uns aux autres comme les maillons d'une longue chaîne brillante.

Parfois elle tentait d'initier sa mère: les mots lui échappaient, ils n'étaient pas tout à fait adaptés à ce qu'elle voulait exprimer.

— Ma fille, mais c'est incohérent ce que tu me racontes-là, disait la mère navrée.

— Pas plus incohérent que ce dont tu parles avec les autres, répondait Marie regardant les choses autour d'elle pour la première fois.

La mère se sentait effleurée comme par un coup d'aile: mais l'oiseau brillant était déjà loin. Alors Marie, observant sa mère d'un œil aigu, disait:

— C'est atroce, n'est-ce pas? Tu souffres?

La mère savait qu'aucun être ne l'avait jamais autant approchée.

Est-ce possible, est-ce possible? se répétait-elle.

Il lui semblait que la sorte de peau opaque qui la séparait

de tout allait se déchirer sous la pression des doigts lumineux de Marie. Elle faisait un grand effort pour rejoindre sa fille, mais son corps lourd et impotent la retenait prisonnière.

Après de telles expériences elle était brisée et retrouvant le monde familier, dur et réfractaire, où elle se comportait avec aisance, elle se demandait où était l'illusion.

Pour Marie, la mère et les autres vaquaient comme des imprudents sur une petite plate-forme au-dessus de l'abîme et parfois elle se couvrait le visage dans la crainte de voir quelqu'un tomber.

— Mais qu'as-tu? lui demandait-on.

— Rien, j'ai eu peur.

En effet elle était décomposée, pâle, tremblante comme une feuille.

Une nuit elle hurla:

— Elle va tomber, elle va tomber. Maman attention. Elle tombe! Ah!

Une voisine l'entendit et accourut frappant des deux poings contre la porte. Son mari la rejoignit, défonça une persienne et tous deux pénétrèrent par la fenêtre.

Marie avait perdu ses sens: on la trouva affaissée sur le tapis.

La mère agonisait dans son lit.

Il y eut le branle-bas que font les vivants quand la mort saisit un des leurs dans la maison.

Marie penchée sur sa mère essayait en vain de la rattraper. Un docteur arriva en même temps que les frères et les sœurs de Marie. L'odeur mortelle des médicaments imprégnait la chambre. Marie les yeux clos, les deux mains croisées sur sa poitrine était reléguée dans un coin. Les frères, les sœurs, le docteur, les voisins debout autour du lit attendaient dans l'appréhension et la peur.

Les larmes coulaient sur les joues blanches de Marie.

On entendit la voix de la mère soudain très forte:

— Marie, où est Marie?

Marie s'approcha et tomba au chevet de la mère, qui posa sa main sur sa chevelure.

— Je vois maintenant ma fille. Tout s'éclaire et c'est une chance de voir clair quand on est vivant. Moi j'ai vécu en aveugle. Elle pencha la tête sur l'épaule et rendit le dernier souffle.

La mort de la mère amena beaucoup de changements dans la maison. Les frères, les sœurs se réunirent souvent autour de la table où ils avaient grandi. Marie s'asseyait en retrait. Des éclats de voix lui arrivaient au-dessus d'un brouhaha confus. Des querelles dressèrent Charles contre Michel. La maison qui avait connu l'harmonie, la joie, la quiétude, la tristesse, le deuil, connut l'âpreté et la véhémence. Les brus vidèrent les armoires, les unes après les autres, et leur contenu fut jeté en vrac sur la table pour un démembrement affreux. Les gendres fumaient d'un air désintéressé, chacun debout derrière son épouse, comme un tuteur soutenant un plant fragile.

Marie poussait de longs gémissements.

— Qu'as-tu? lui demandait-on.

— C'est ça le réel?

— Oui, c'est la vie. Chacun se défend.

— C'est incohérent, disait Marie.

Ils haussaient les épaules comme pour dire: « elle est toquée ».

Quand le linge fut partagé, on apporta les objets, les tapis, les rideaux, les bijoux, les vêtements, les livres, les instruments de musique, les casseroles... Tout y passa.

Il ne resta à Marie que son lit, un antique fauteuil, un guéridon, une louche, trois écuelles, une pendule et un trousseau de clés inutiles. Elle passa la nuit éclairée par une pauvre ampoule pendue au bout du fil électrique.

Un matin, Charles, intrigué, vint prendre de ses nouvelles. Il dit, la mine honteuse:

— Tu vas bien, sœurette?

— Comme c'est triste, c'est méconnaissable, dit-elle en frôlant le mur de sa main.

« Elle se rend compte alors ». Puis il se reprit et développa ses plans.

Il voulait entreprendre de grandes choses, vivre plus à son aise, s'offrir ce qu'il convoitait depuis sa jeunesse.

— Viens chez nous. Que vas-tu rester seule dans cette grande maison, qui résonne comme une caisse vide? Tu verras comme tu seras heureuse. Tout a changé depuis le temps que tu n'es plus venue chez nous. Ici on pourrait monter un hôtel ou bien faire des frais et installer des appartements meublés. Ça rapporte tu sais...

— Ça rapporte quoi? disait Marie.

— Mais de l'argent.

— Pourquoi faire?

Elle était désarmante.

— Alors je t'emmène?

— Tu sais bien que je ne sors pas.

— Pourquoi? dit Charles distraitement, c'est lugubre ici...

Marie se leva brusquement, saisit la main de Charles et s'écroula à ses pieds.

— Qu'est-ce que cela veut dire? Marie, reviens à toi... Tu resteras dans la maison, si l'idée d'en partir doit te rendre malade...

Il courut dans la salle de bains et s'arrêta médusé: là où autrefois se trouvait l'armoire à pharmacie, il n'y avait qu'un rectangle blanc sur le mur.

— Il n'y a plus rien dans cette baraque, maugréa-t-il.

Il trempa son mouchoir à la fontaine, revint à sa sœur l'oreille basse, l'âme coupable, et essaya de la frictionner.

Marie ouvrit les yeux.

— Charles, cours vite chez toi. Tu n'entends pas l'ambulance?

Charles prêta l'oreille. De loin, de très loin, comme un sifflement d'insecte dans l'air, il perçut le timbre sinistre.

Il s'enfuit laissant Marie haletante. Elle voulut le suivre, mais le portail à peine franchi, la panique la saisit. « A quoi bon? », se dit-elle remontant lentement dans sa chambre.

Marie attendit.

Charles et Suzanne vinrent la trouver quelques jours après

les obsèques d'Agathe leur enfant. Suzanne, comme folle, la supplia de pardonner le mal qu'on lui avait fait.

— Mais quel mal? demandait Marie sincère.

— Dis-moi, comment tu as été avertie de la mort de ma petite Agathe.

— Rien, je ne sais pas.

— Mais comment as-tu su? insista Charles. J'étais avec toi et je n'ai rien entendu.

— Je l'ai su et c'est tout.

— Dans tes rêves?

— Non, pas dans mes rêves.

Charles et Suzanne la pressaient de questions, lui posaient des énigmes, l'interrogeaient sur le lieu où se trouvait Agathe maintenant.

— Je t'en conjure, dis-nous qu'elle est heureuse, qu'elle ne souffre pas.

— Je ne sais pas, répondait Marie. Quand les êtres meurent, ils disparaissent, il n'y a plus rien après.

— Non, protestait Suzanne avec véhémence. Tu te trompes. Il y a la vie éternelle.

— Mais ce n'est plus pareil à notre vie.

Suzanne était très pieuse et elle était sûre, sûre, que l'âme de son enfant s'était envolée aux cieux où elle imaginait Dieu le Père au milieu, à sa droite le Fils, à sa gauche le Saint-Esprit et les âmes bienheureuses éparpillées en couronne, bustes de chérubins joufflus portant une paire d'ailes sur leurs épaules dodues.

C'était plus fort que sa raison et seule cette vision lui procurait une certain bien-être, une trêve.

Marie lui disait:

— Tu vois bien que toi aussi tu inventes pour continuer à vivre...

— Je ne vis pas, je survis, répondait Suzanne affligée.

Après cette épreuve atroce, que Charles avait expliquée comme un châtiment de Dieu pour le mal que lui, l'aîné, il avait infligé à Marie, une innocente, il n'insista plus pour transformer la demeure familiale en maison de rapport. Quant

à Suzanne, la crainte du Seigneur lui fit rendre à Marie les objets qu'elle lui avait volés. Depuis qu'elle avait annoncé deux morts dans sa famille, Marie jouissait d'un certain prestige auprès des siens. Ainsi son étrangeté avait un sens: Marie avait le don de double vue.

Pourtant elle n'était ni loquace, ni assez habile pour profiter de la situation.

Sa réputation s'étendit: on vint de loin pour la consulter.

Les gens s'en repartaient contents d'avoir pu raconter leur histoire à une oreille bienveillante. Le silence dans la chambre était fait d'un ronronnement berceur, pareil au dévidement d'une bobine. Suzanne se taisait, humble devant Marie. Elle attendait toujours une réponse et quand elle était à bout de patience, elle disait:

— Marie n'as-tu pas un message pour moi?

— Un message?

— Oui, de la petite... D'Agathe.

Marie frémissait.

— Tais-toi, Suzanne, tu me fais peur.

De ne pas obtenir de Marie la résurrection d'Agathe qu'elle espérait avec ferveur, commença à aigrir Suzanne. Elle perdait son humilité. Elle se demandait si Marie n'était pas une sorcière et si pour se venger, elle n'avait pas sollicité et obtenu la mort d'Agathe.

« Il n'est pas possible qu'elle ait vu la mort de mon enfant à distance. Elle a mené le jeu, le jeu terrible qui consiste à jeter des sorts et à s'emparer des âmes... »

Ses soupçons roidirent Suzanne et en l'occupant la détachèrent de son chagrin. Avec cette logique imperturbable que les êtres nomment lucidité, Suzanne bâtit une histoire d'envoûtement qui aboutit au crime. Maintenant elle retournait chez Marie non pour évoquer l'âme d'Agathe, mais pour découvrir des preuves.

Suzanne profitant de l'air absent de Marie fouillait la maison. Pourtant Charles, elle-même et les autres, s'étaient jetés dessus et l'avaient nettoyée de fond en comble comme des

chiens affamés raclent un os. Mais tout était bon à Suzanne pour croire.

Un jour Marie la surprit dans la cuisine flairant un paquet de plantes médicinales.

— Que fais-tu Suzanne. Que cherches-tu?

— Tu m'épies? dit Suzanne. Allons avoue, avoue tes sorcelleries. Tu vois bien que tu es démasquée.

— Suzanne, dit Marie, dorénavant ne viens plus, c'est inutile. Tu as oublié Agathe. Tu penses à elle, mais tu ne vis plus de ton chagrin.

— Ainsi non contente de l'avoir tuée une fois, tu veux tuer encore sa mémoire, dit-elle avec emportement. Cela ne sera pas. Je la défendrai, dussè-je...

Elle brandit le rouleau à pâtisserie. Marie ne broncha pas.

— Frappe si tu veux. Ne sais-tu pas que les sentiments ne nous obéissent pas, mais qu'au contraire ce sont eux qui nous commandent. Leur puissance sur nous est mystérieuse et personne n'est capable de savoir pourquoi il aime et pourquoi il n'aime plus, pourquoi il souffre et pourquoi il ne souffre plus. Toi, Suzanne, tu souffres moins.

Marie disparut silencieusement comme elle était arrivée, et Suzanne se demanda par quel artifice elle s'était évaporée là, sous ses yeux. Privée de cet amour exclusif et dévorant qu'elle ressentait envers Agathe morte, Suzanne ne se reconnaissait plus de raison de vivre.

Comment peut-on communiquer avec les autres, se demandait Marie, puisque chacun est hermétiquement clos dans une maisonnette où il vit avec des images. Quand il meurt, cette maisonnette est détruite et bientôt nul ne se souvient qu'elle a existé.

Beaucoup de gens inquiets de leur destin venaient la voir et la suppliaient de leur dire la vérité.

— Mais puisque je ne sais pas... répétait Marie les larmes aux yeux. On lui offrait de l'or et elle, navrée, repoussait les présents et faisait: non, non, de la tête.

— Alors quoi, tu vas te laisser mourir, lui disaient Charles ou Michel, quand ils la voyaient manger si peu.

— Je n'ai besoin de presque rien, et ce que j'ai me suffit, répondait-elle.

Charles, finalement apaisé, fut repris par l'ancien rêve de transformer la demeure familiale en maison de rapport.

— Des capitaux qui dorment, disait-il à son frère Michel. Rachetons sa part à Marie et avec cet argent nous la ferons entrer dans un hospice où on prendra soin d'elle, car elle ne peut pas rester seule plus longtemps.

Suzanne, Michel et sa femme, Bernadette et Camille, étaient de cet avis et décidèrent pour Marie.

Au jour fixé, les deux frères la prirent chacun par un bras pour la conduire.

— Vous avez peur que je me sauve? dit Marie en riant.

Par moment, elle déconcertait.

Une sœur de charité les fit entrer dans une salle nue, au pavement noir et blanc, aux boiseries sombres, aux fenêtres inaccessibles.

La Mère Supérieure vint les accueillir, vieille femme trop experte pour avoir besoin d'explications.

Elle fit parler Marie et tendit l'oreille afin de percevoir la fêlure.

— Elle n'est pas loquace, dit-elle aux deux frères en les raccompagnant, mais cela n'est pas le signe d'un dérangement mental. Est-elle sujette à des crises? Devient-elle furibonde?

— Non, dit Charles. Elle est docile. Elle a prévu la mort de deux des nôtres; elle refuse purement et simplement le monde extérieur. C'est pourquoi nous vous la confions. Elle est inapte à la vie de tout le monde. Mais nous ne croyons pas qu'il soit nécesaire de la soumettre à un traitement...

— La vie de tout le monde? reprit la Mère Supérieure étonnée. Mais chacun a la sienne.

Il y eut un silence.

— Notre docteur la verra. C'est un homme plein d'expérience et de bon sens. La médecine a fait des pas de géant dans le domaine des maladies mentales. Et avec l'aide de la Divine Providence, les miracles ne sont pas impossibles.

Charles aurait voulu prier la Mère Supérieure de laisser Marie tranquille et de ne rien entreprendre, mais il craignit que la Mère ne la leur renvoyât et alors que feraient-ils avec une telle charge sur les bras?

Non, mieux valait qu'elle se pliât à la discipline de la maison et après tout, ce serait pour son bien.

Alors Marie comme secrétement avertie apparut sur le seuil de la porte.

— Charles, Charles, dis bien à notre Mère Supérieure que je ne désire que la paix. J'obéirai, je ferai tout ce que l'on me dira, si on me laisse véritablement en paix.

D'où lui vient cette inflexibilité, pensa Charles qui avait honte de lui. Aussi courut-il vers Marie, saisi d'un funeste pressentiment et lui pressant le bras il dit:

— Sœurette, un mot, un seul et je te ramène chez nous. On se serrera va, il y a de la place lorsque les cœurs...

Marie sourit.

— Charles et Michel, la solution que vous avez trouvée pour moi est la meilleure. Chez l'un de vous ou chez mes sœurs, je pèserais à la longue. Vous me considérez comme une infirme et les infirmes sont lourds à supporter. Cela demande une trop grande tension, d'être dévoué tous les jours. C'est un métier qui se fait payer très cher et pour lequel le personnel se relaie...

— Elle n'est pas si folle que cela, dit la Mère Supérieure sèchement.

— C'est égal, dit Marie, et elle disparut à reculons laissant le même sillage que celui d'un poisson intrépide qui plonge au milieu des vagues.

Michel et Charles partirent.

— Fait-on bien ce que l'on fait? dit Charles, que ses actions impures disposaient à la philosophie.

— Oui, puisque c'est pour son bien et pour le bien de tous, rétorqua Michel agacé. Quel bonheur pouvions-nous lui donner?

— Je ne sais pas, dit Charles. Notre affection peut-être...

— Elle n'en a que faire.

— Crois-tu?

— J'en suis sûr. Si nous sommes des égoïstes, notre égoïsme est sain, loyal, protecteur. Elle aussi, elle est égoïste à sa manière. Pense à tous les ennuis que nous avons eus à cause d'elle.

— Bon,... j'ai vu l'architecte: il dit qu'un cabinet de toilette serait nécessaire au fond du petit couloir entre la chambre de papa et celle de maman.

— Alors, interrompit Charles ennuyé, nons nous verrons une autre fois pour parler de cela.

— Comme tu voudras, dit Michel se dirigeant vers sa voiture. Mais le temps presse et il s'agit d'aller vite, les frais courent... Tu ne montes pas? demanda-t-il distraitement en mettant le moteur en marche.

— Non, je préfère me dégourdir les jambes. Que veux-tu, cette démarche m'a vieilli de dix ans. Je ne suis plus sûr qu'elle fût inévitable.

— A demain, dit Michel haussant les épaules. Téléphone moi!

En rentrant chez lui après une promenade sans but dans les rues de la ville, Charles était vané.

— Ouf, c'est fait, dit-il à Suzanne en s'affalant dans un fauteuil. Je me sens brisé. C'est le sort malheureux de Marie. Et puis nous avons failli à la promesse faite à notre mère de ne jamais l'abandonner.

— Ah non, dit Suzanne laissant éclater sa colère. Pas de scrupules, ni de remords. Charles tu déformes les faits. D'abord les intérêts auxquels tu fais allusion n'ont pas de valeur dans le monde où vit Marie. Elle l'a dit et répété. Il faut être logique: Marie n'est pas tout à fait folle, mais elle n'est pas non plus en possession de sa raison. Elle n'a jamais manifesté que de l'indifférence envers les contingences...

— Soit, dit Charles. Cette conversation est inutile si tu ne comprends pas ce sentiment de culpabilité qui m'obsède au-delà de tout raisonnement. Brisons-là. Je suis en ce moment surchargé de besognes. Michel m'aide, mais habilement il m'a

laissé la responsabilité financière de l'affaire. Et Dieu sait si en ce moment mon esprit est loin de tout cela. Demain les travaux commencent dans la maison de Marie...

— Pourquoi dis-tu toujours « la maison de Marie »? dit Suzanne choquée.

— Parce que c'était la sienne et que c'était là qu'elle eût dû filer sa quenouille en paix, comme elle disait.

— Encore! dit Suzanne.

— Ne sois pas si dure.

— Depuis la mort de notre Agathe, j'ai, moi aussi, le droit d'être dure.

— Tu te venges, dit Charles ironiquement.

— Je ne me venge pas. J'obéis à ma nature.

Les époux se regardèrent, ennemis l'un à autre.

Ne valait-il pas mieux jeter le masque et en finir.

Mais telle est la force de l'habitude, que lorsque la cuisinière annonça: — Madame est servie, ils se levèrent ensemble et Charles s'effaça courtoisement pour laisser passer sa femme

Qu'advenait-il de Marie dans cette maison de santé, aux mains des bonnes soeurs, des infirmières, du docteur?

Le docteur, vieil homme blasé, la considérait un cas intéressant. Il l'observait longuement sans rien dire, sans bouger, puis se levait et sortait en soupirant.

Marie l'accueillait d'un sourire et se familiarisait avec cette présence neutre.

— Vous êtes comme ma mère, lui dit-elle pour lui manifester sa confiance. On ne vous sent pas.

Malgré cela, le docteur avait toutes les peines du monde à la faire parler. Marie contrairement aux autres malades n'éprouvait nullement le besoin de se confier.

— Je ne sais pas, répondait-elle sincèrement et non pour se dérober.

— Essayez d'accrocher un souvenir?

— Un souvenir? Marie ne comprenait pas.

— Quand vous étiez petite, rappelez-vous?

— Le passé est mort, disait Marie.

— Vous deviez avoir des jeux commes les autres petites filles. Voyons qu'elle était votre occupation favorite?

— Je jouais, disait Marie lointaine.

— A quoi? Et seule?

— A la marelle, avec les autres, ou au kaléidoscope, seule.

Les interrogatoires n'avançaient pas et le docteur devenait suspect en insistant.

— Le subconscient de Marie, disait-il, est pur comme le cristal de roche, comme le diamant.

Après l'enfance, qui tenait toute dans le kaléidoscope, il passa à l'adolescence.

Marie en avait encore moins retenu.

Le docteur revenait toujours à sa vie sentimentale.

— Alors quoi? Pas d'amourettes? Jolie comme vous deviez l'être? Pas de jeunes garçons autour de vous? Les copains de vos frères ne vous contaient pas fleurette... Jean, Jacques, Paul... Essayez de vous souvenir? Un effort, diantre!

Marie cherchait. Elle appelait et sa mémoire ne répondait pas.

— Rien ne parle, disait-elle. Tout se tait. J'aimerais vous faire plaisir, vous êtes si gentil. Mais tout est tranquille: il y a de l'absence.

Le docteur louchait. Ce style lui faisait croire à de la supercherie.

— Marie, disait-il sévèrement, vous me racontez des blagues. Revenons à nos moutons: Jean, Jacques, Paul?...

Ce nom de Paul jeté au hasard fractura une porte vérouillée. Marie éprouva un sentiment d'extase et d'effroi.

Elle se tourna vers le docteur et dit de sa voix claire et chantante.

— Il y a un écran blanc et des ombres qui bougent. Est-ce cela le souvenir?

Le docteur n'osait interrompre. « Tout de même » se disait-il.

Marie reprenait:

— Tous les soirs nous mourons et nous ressuscitons le matin, jusqu'au jour où nous ne nous éveillons plus.

— Voilà une manière originale de se débarrasser des far deaux, mais mon enfant rien ne se fait sans la mémoire.

Le docteur, pris au jeu, se lançait dans une explicatio fervente.

Marie se disait: « C'est une marotte, chacun la sienne » Il ne m'écoute pas quand je parle et moi, je n'entends pas qu'il me dit. Au terme de ses observations, le docteur mit se notes au propre et classa Marie parmi les incurables.

— Dans l'état actuel de nos connaissances, dit-il à la Mère Supérieure, Marie Dubois n'est pas récupérable. Mais rien ne dit que dans cent ans ou plus, elle ne serait pas une clair voyante, une initiatrice qui remettrait en question les notion humaines... Car enfin pourquoi n'aurait-elle pas raison?

— Halte, dit la Mère Supérieure scandalisée. Vous blas phémez docteur... La Divin Providence...

Le docteur l'avait complètement oubliée.

« A moi aussi, se dit-il, il arrive de ne pas tenir compt des croyances des autres ».

Il prit congé de la Mère Supérieure, vexé d'avoir laiss transparaître son profond athéisme.

Pourquoi pas? se disait-il marchant dans la cohue du soir Tous ces gens courent après l'imaginaire. L'essentiel n'est pa d'aboutir, mais de voyager confortablement. Marie a trouv son accord, elle est heureuse...

La Mère Supérieure mécontente des propos du docteur était retournée auprès de Marie. Elle la surprit dans sa pos favorite, les mains croisées, immobile, les yeux levés vers l plafond, recueillie, fervente.

— Mon enfant, que faites-vous? Priez, priez! Dieu aur pitié de vous dans sa miséricorde infinie et vous donnera l raison...

Elle referma soigneusement la porte et s'en fut comm un ange. Des heures s'écoulèrent sans que Marie tressailli Ce n'est qu'à la tombée du soir que les mots prononcés par l Mère Supérieure comme restés en suspens dans l'air, tra versèrent la chambre et vinrent frapper le tympan de Marie

— Je ne prie pas, dit Marie en frissonnant. Je tisse.

RENÉ CHAR

WHICH RIMBAUD?

Before approaching Rimbaud, let us begin by deciding that of all the descriptions that have been applied to him (R. the Visionary, R. the Tough, etc...) none can be either accepted or rejected. However exact or appropriate they seem, they are beside the point, since a being such as Rimbaud — and a few others of his kind — necessarily contains them all. Rimbaud the Poet is enough, being infinite. The decisive, the forever inaccessible virtue of poetry is, we believe, its invulnerability. So total is it, that the poet, the man of every day, who was only its instrument, ultimately becomes its beneficiary. From the Tribunals of the Inquisition to the present day, no temporal evil has ever been able to get the better of a Teresa of Avila, any more than of a Boris Pasternak. Nothing we can ever be told about them can make them seem intolerable, or shut off our approach to their genius. In saying this we need not even think of the compensatory swing of justice which might redress their position as it might that of any other mortal, according to changing notions and the flavour of the time.

Latterly we have had it pointed out to us that Nerval was not always an innocent, that Vigny behaved frightfully in some ridiculous affair of his old age. Before them it was Villon, Racine... (Racine, whom his most recent bio-

grapher reprimands with a competence I am still at a loss to discover). Those who really know poetry know that *this is not true,* whatever the appearances and the incriminating evidence. The orthodox and the atheist, the prosecutors and petti-foggers can never attain professional access to poetry. Strange fate! « *I is another.* » The action of justice fails at the point where poetry burns, and endures, where the poet has, for a few evenings, warmed his hands. If some worthy professor repentant — comically enough — at forty, of his too vehement admiration, at twenty, for the author of the *Illuminations* chooses to regale us with a blend of his present compunction and his past enjoyment under the somewhat rosy aspect of two stout volumes of definitive research, such a labour of accumulation adds not a couple of drops to the rain-storm, not an orange-peel's worth of light to the sunbeam by which we read. A poem leaves us free to obey its power, and forces our love. This duality is the source of our uneasiness, our pride and delight.

When Rimbaud made off, turning a back of stone on all literary activity, on the existence of his Parnassian seniors, there was little surprise in this sudden disappearance. It was to prove an enigma only in later years, once his death was disclosed, along with the divisions of a destiny which had nevertheless been cut clean through as by a single saw-stroke. Let us venture to believe there was no rupture, no violent struggle once the final crisis was passed, but rather — to use a ready image — a shutting-off of communication, a stoppage between the main volcanic fire and the crater's mouth, followed by a de-scaling of those regions which poetry had magnetized and made to flower, a silence and transformation of the Word, an exhaustion of visionary energy; and last of all the appearance, on the slopes of objective reality, of *something other,* whose nature it would certainly be dangerous and futile to determine here. Having so speedily established his output, Rimbaud quite literally forgot about it, seems to

have suffered nothing from it, not even to have detested it, never again felt the green scar of it on his bronzed wrist. Between the extremes of the adolescent and the extremes of the man the gap is immeasurable. Is there any sign that Rimbaud ever tried to regain possession of the poems which he had left in the hands of old friends? Not one that we know of. Total indifference. Not even a memory. Triumphant thorns are what emerge from the slender branch instead of fruits, from the time when the tree was young, — prickles are all that the heady perfume of the blossom had promised.

Profound, peculiar, brilliant or plausible as critical comment or observation on a poem may be, it can only reduce to a meaning, an intention, a phenomenon whose only function is *to be*. The richness of a poem can be acceptably measured by the number of interpretations which it gives rise to and as rapidly demolishes, though they continue to subsist in our being. What is it that gleams, says more than it whispers, travels silent, and vanishes into the dark, leaving only a void of longing, a promise of immunity? This intensely personal illumination, this shiver, this hypnosis, these innumerable quiverings are so many versions, plausible ones, of a single event: the present in its perpetuity, wheel-shaped, like the sun — and like the human countenance, before earth and heavens, drawing it to themselves, pulled it pitifully long.

It is madness for the poet to go, as poet, to Rimbaud, since he personifies for us what gold was for him: the poetic absolute. His poetry provokes and fascinates the commentator only to break him. No matter who. And just as he attained his own unity across the disparity of things and beings out of which he created himself, so he catches all the impoverished reflexes of his own contradictions in a derisive mirror. There can be no objection in this, since he contains them all: « *I wanted to say what it says, literally, and in every sense* » —

a pronouncement which, whether authentic or not, is *true*, and renews its truth indefinitely.

Rimbaud is to be viewed only in the perspective of poetry. What is so scandalous about that? So seen, his life and work reveal an unparalleled consistency which is neither due to nor opposed to their uniqueness. Every impulse in his work, every instant of his life, is a part of an experiment whose purpose, guided, it might be said, to perfection by Apollo and Pluto, was to be the most naked possible revelation of poetry, a revelation whose laws escape us but the nobility of whose absolute existence comes to haunt us like a familiar. It is a warning: without poetry, between our foot and the stone it presses, between our eyes and the field they look at, the world is a void. Real life, that irrefutable colossus, can only be born in the womb of poetry. And yet the sovereign power to dispose, at will, of that real life, to draw creative force from it, is not (or no longer, or not yet) within man's control, except in brief orgasmic flashes. In the darknesses that follow, thanks to the knowledge afforded by those flashes, Time, between the horror of its void and a hope — a presentiment which is our privilege and is but the warning of another moment of extreme poetry and vision approaching — Time will disperse itself and flow away, half desert, half garden, but to our profit.

Rimbaud was frightened by his discoveries; what went on in his theatre dazzled and terrified him. He was afraid that the unheard-of might be real, and that in consequence the risks which his visions made him run might also be real, heavily in league against him, vowed to his ruin. The poet plays at pretence, trying to force back the attack of reality on to an imaginary plane, in the form of a legendary, biblical East, where his fabulous death-wish might dwindle and grow harmless. Alas! The pretence was in vain, the terror was justified, the danger was more than real. The encounter he sought and dreaded, suddenly leapt out like a pair of horns, « *piercing with its points both soul and body.* »

A rare phenomenon in French poetry, and unusual in the latter half of the XIX century, nature, in Rimbaud, plays a predominant role. Not a static nature, nor one to be admired for its conventional beauties or its products, but a nature submerged in the current of the poem, appearing from time to time as its subject, its shining source, its creative energy, a stay for its inspired or despairing gestures, a redemption. Once again — and this is an advance on Baudelaire — nature moves. Once again we can feel, touch it, absorb its strange minuteness. We see it in repose, only to feel the imminent earthquake. And Rimbaud abandons the soft bolster of grass where his head, resting a weary body, can turn to a stream, for some frantic chase to the summit of a cliff vomiting storm and hurricane. He runs from the one to the other, from infancy to the infernal. In the middle ages nature was combative, unapproachable, breachless, indisputably tremendous. Men were few, tools were few, and of humble scope. Weapons of war disdained or disregarded nature. At the end of the XIX century, nature, after many vicissitudes, besieged by the enterprises of an ever-multiplying mankind, breached, despoiled, disembowelled, cut up, stripped, whipped and subdued, nature, with all its precious forests, was reduced to a pitiable slavery, subjected to a terrible loss of its rights. How could it revolt, except through the poet's voice? The poet feels a lost past, despised by his fathers, revive in him with all its secret affinities intact. And he flies to its aid, an incurable but lucid Don Quixote, identifying nature's distress with his own, restoring to it, with his passion and his struggle, something of its life-giving depths. Knowing the vanity of revivals, he knows too, none better, that the Mother of Secrets, she who keeps the sands from spreading death on the heart's threshing-floor, the persecuted Queen, must be defended to the last.

With Rimbaud, poetry ceased to be a literary genre, a contest. Before him Heraclitus, and a painter, Georges de la Tour, had planned and shown what kind of house, above all

others, man should inhabit; a dwelling-place both for thought and for inspiration. Baudelaire is the most *humane* genius of all Christendom. His song is the incarnation of its conscience, its glory, its remorse, its curses at the moment of its execution, its hatred, and its apocalypse. « *Poets* » said Holderlin, « *for the most part come at the beginning or the ending of an era. It is through song that peoples quit the heaven of their childhood to enter the life of action, the rule of civilization. It is through song that they return to primitive life. Art is the transition from nature to civilisation, and from civilization to nature.* » Rimbaud is the first poet of a civilization yet to appear, one whose horizons and boundaries are nothing but whirling straws. To adapt the words of Maurice Blanchot, he gives us the experience of a totality, based on the future, expiated in the present, and owing authority to none but itself. But if I knew what Rimbaud signifies for me, I should be able to define what poetry lies before me, and I would no longer have to write it.

The poetic instrument invented by Rimbaud is perhaps the only reply which a crammed, self-satisfied Western world, barbarian, reduced to impotence, having lost even the instinct of self-preservation and the desire for beauty, can make to the sacred traditions and practices of the East and of the ancient religions, to the magic arts of primitive man. Is this instrument, in our hands, our last chance of restoring lost powers? Of regaining the level of Egypt, Crete, the Dogons and the Magdalenians? This backward yearning is the worst of western cultural perversions, the craziest of aberrations. The longing to return to the beginning, for renewal, can only further twist the deformity, precipitate the fall, and punish our blood to no purpose. Rimbaud had felt and resisted this temptation. « *We must be absolutely modern. Never flinch from the step taken.* » There is a hinterland to modern poetry whose frontier alone is dark. No flag can fly for long on that capricious ice-floe which is won or lost as it chooses.

But in our eyes it marks the spot whence the Lightning comes, with its virgin resources. Some may think « What of that? And how can we make out what is happening below there? » But would such cavillers have dreamed of cutting a flint, twenty thousand years ago?

Elusively, Rimbaud situates his golden age in the past or the future, without distinction. He never settles for either. If he invokes another time, whether from nostalgia or need, it is only to demolish it at once and return to the present, that target whose centre is always eager for new projectiles, that inevitable harbour for every departure. But from the within to the beyond the stretch is tremendous. Rimbaud shows us the connection. He drags us along with him, willingly, subjugated by the extraordinary speed of a dialectic whose very perfection fends off *unreason*, by a precise and calculated whirlwind that carries everything along with it, loading the process of becoming with a charge of pure time.

In Rimbaud, statement just precedes counter-statement, with a brief farewell. His secret, the match to his bonfire, is rapidity. The speed and the scope of his speech embraces and conquers an extent of meaning which had never been reached or occupied before. In poetry we can only inhabit the territory we are leaving, create the work which is no longer a part of us, and conquer duration only by destroying time. But whatever is won by negation, detachment or separation, is won only for others. The escaped prisoner finds the walls re-closing around him at once. The liberator is free only in those he liberates. The poet can only enjoy the freedom of others.

Within a poem by Rimbaud every stanza, every line, every phrase lives an autonomous poetic life. In the poem called *Genius* he describes himself as in no other. His conclusion is, in effect, a dismissal. Like Nietzsche, like Lautreamont, having demanded the utmost of us, he asks us to « *let him go.* » The final, the essential request. If he was never

satisfied with anything, how can we ever be satisfied with him? His journey has only one end: death, which is no great matter, except from this side. Death received him, after a physical ordeal as incredible as the visionary ordeal of his adolescence. But then, that hard mother who brought him into the world had set a guard on his overweening cradle, a guard like a circle of young vipers, greedy for heat. Their hold was such that they clung to him to the end, never letting go until the brink of the grave [1].

Translated by David Paul.

[1] *This essay is the Preface to the Complete Works of Rimbaud soon to be published by the Club Français du Livre, Paris.*

VERNON WATKINS

TOUCH WITH YOUR FINGERS

Touch with your fingers
The strings of song.
Love runs deeper
Than all time's wrong.
I have considered
Such things long.

Banishing waters
Bore it once.
D'Orléans looked
Towards the coast of France.
Florence exiled
Her noblest sons.

Under the rising
Spectral moon
Rome, Alexandria,
Babylon,
Athens and Carthage
Rise in stone.

Time that is over
Comes not again;

Yet instinctive
The strings remain.
All is fugitive,
Nothing vain.

Magical foliage
Glittering shone.
There they trembled
Who now are gone.
Dancers perish:
The dance goes on.

What then compelled me
To take on trust
Words of the poets
Laid in dust?
Time cannot answer.
True love must.

Love is compounded
Of all it cast.
Sacred forgiveness
Binds all fast.
Timeless vision
Discerns no Past.

Shade of Calliope,
Guard my days.
Such compassion
From dust I raise,
Nothing is valid
Except that praise.

RUTHVEN TODD

OF MOLDS AND MUSHROOMS

Agrippina, well aware of Claudius' greed
For Caesar's mushroom, knew also that it looked
Like death-cap or destroying-angel, so a god
Made room on earth for Nero, whose joke,
« Food of the gods, » allowed for deadly poison.

Some still, with unreasoning fear, disgust,
Kick or switch down the mushrooms by their path,
Leaving the amanita rudely shattered, gills
Like fallen feathers scattered, veil and volva
Broken, and all this symmetry destroyed.

The lack of chlorophyll suggests the parasite
Which guilty man so readily despises.
These are strange fruit of the thin mycellium,
That webs this world beneath the surface,
And which can persist in its invisibility

Breaking down discard of leaves and timber,
Which otherwise would overtop the wood
Extinguishing everything, so that the seed
May sprout to nourishment and the cycle
Of death, decay and rebirth still go on.

And I, aesthetic and somewhat botanical,
Would note and praise the diversity
Of shapes, variety of colors of the fungi,
Ball, club, shelf, parasol, cup and horn,
And the suave velvet of the different molds.

I would recall the fungi in their settings;
Fly-agaric, scarlet with wrinkled creamy warts,
In birch woods of Dumbartonshire, but lemon
Yellow in New England, toxic they said to flies
But intoxicant for the Kamchatka tribesman.

Near Selkirk once I found a montrous puffball,
Far bigger than my younger brother's head,
A gleaming baldpate beckoning me across the field
To find and greet poor Yorick's vegetable skull,
Solitary underneath the well-clipped hazel hedge.

Where anciently the monks had had their abbey,
Beside my Essex farmhouse, clustered blewitts
Were palely violet below the dark-fruited sloes,
And the old gnarled oaks within the woods
Were sometimes richly shelved with beefsteaks;

And I, in a strictly rationed world,
Welcomed and ate these, and the others that I found,
Spongy cèpe, chantrelle and honeycombed morel,
Grey oyster-mushroom and tall dignified parasol,
Which I again met later on a Chilmark lawn.

Brown-purple trumpets of the cornucopia
Stand clear against the brilliance of the moss
Under a clump of beech-trees at Gay Head,
While vast fairy-rings, some centuries of age,
Manacle the cropped grass of the South Downs.

The wooden ships of England knew dry-rot,
Pepys gathering toadstools bigger than his fists,
So that ten oaks were cut for each one used,
And the white-rimmed tawniness rioted again
Among the bombed buildings that I sometime knew.

Fungi have made their share of history:
St. Anthony's fire, from ergot in the rye,
Swept savagely through mediaeval France,
Rotting potatoes drove the Irishman abroad,
And French grapes grow on North American stock.

A moldering cantaloup from a Peoria supermarket
Supplanted the culture Fleming kept for years,
And others now sample soil, remove and scan
The molds that, in their destructiveness,
Aid ailing man by driving out his enemies.

But I, walking in fields or through the woods,
Welcome the vermilion russula, the sulphur
Polyporus, or inky shaggy-cap upon a heap of dung,
Without questioning their usefulness to me.
The ecology of my appreciation seems to need

Clavaria's coral branches on a damp dark bank,
Odorous stink-horns prodding through the grass,
And petalled dry geasters studding a sandy road.
These many-fangled fruits make bright
My sundry places where no flowers can bloom.

MURIEL SPARK

THE PORTOBELLO ROAD

One day in my young youth at high summer, lolling with my lovely companions upon a haystack I found a needle. Already and privately for some years I had been guessing that I was set apart from the common run, but this of the needle attested the fact to my whole public, George, Kathleen and Skinny. I sucked my thumb, for when I had thrust my idle hand deep into the hay, the thumb was where the needle had stuck.

When everyone had recovered George said, « She put in her thumb and pulled out a plum. » Then away we were into our merciless hacking-hecking laughter again.

The needle had gone fairly deep into the thumby cushion and a small red river flowed and spread from this tiny puncture. So that nothing of our joy should lag, George put in quickly,

« Mind your bloody thumb on my shirt. »

Then hac-hec-hoo, we shrieked into the hot Borderland again. That is my thought every time I turn over my old papers and come across the photograph. Skinny, Kathleen and afternoon. Really I should not care to be so young of heart myself are in the photo atop the haystack. Skinny had just finished analysing the inwards of my find.

« It couldn't have been done by brains. You haven't much rains but you're a lucky wee thing. »

Everyone agreed that the needle betokened extraordinary uck. As it was becoming a serious conversation, George said,

« I'll take a photo. »

I wrapped my hanky round my thumb and got myself rganised. George pointed up from his camera and shouted,

« Look, there's a mouse! »

Kathleen screamed and I screamed although I think we new here was no mouse. But this gave us an extra session of qualing hee-hoo's. Finally we three composed ourselves for eorge's picture. We look lovely and it was a great day at the ime, but I would not care for it all over again. From that ay I was known as Needle.

One Saturday in recent years I was mooching down the ortobello Road from the Ladbroke Grove end, threading mong the crowds of marketers on the narrow pavement when saw a woman. She had a haggard careworn wealthy look, hin but for the breasts forced-up high like a pigeon's. I had ot seen her for nearly five years. How changed she was! But recognised Kathleen my friend, her features had already egun to sink and portrude in the way that mouths and noses o in people destined always to be old for their years. When had last seen her, nearly five years ago, Kathleen, barely hirty, had said,

« I've lost all my looks, it's in the family. All the women re handsome as girls but we go off early, we go brown and osey. »

I stood silently among the people, watching. As you will ee, I wasn't in a position to speak to Kathleen. I saw her hoving in her avid manner from stall to stall. She was always ond of antique jewellery and of bargains. I wondered that I ad not seen her before in the Portobello Road on my Saturday orning ambles. Her long stiff-crooked fingers pounced to elect a jade ring from amongst the jumble of brooches and endants, onyx, moonstone and gold, set out on the stall.

« What d'you think of this? » she said.

I saw then who was with her. I had been half-conscious of the huge man following several paces behind her, and now I noticed him.

« It looks all right, » he said. « How much is it? »

« How much is it? » Kathleen asked the vendor.

I took a good look at this man accompanying Kathleen. It was her husband. The beard was unfamiliar, but I recognised beneath it his enormous mouth, the bright sensuous lips, the large brown eyes forever brimming with pathos.

It was not for me to speak to Kathleen, but I had a sudden inspiration which caused me to say quietly,

« Hallo George. »

The giant of a man turned round to face the direction of my voice. There were so many people — but at length he saw me.

« Hallo George, » I said again.

Kathleen had started to haggle with the stall-owner, in her old way, over the price of the jade ring. George continued to stare at me, his big mouth slightly parted so that I could see a wide slit of red lips and white teeth between the fair grassy growths of beard and moustache.

« My God! » he said.

« What's the matter? » said Kathleen.

« Hallo George! » I said again, quite loud this time, and cheerfully.

« Look! » said George. « Look who's there, over beside the fruit stall. »

Kathleen looked but didn't see.

« Who is it? » she said impatiently.

« It's Needle, » he said. « She said 'Hallo George.' »

« *Needle,* » said Kathleen. « Who do you mean? You don't mean our old friend *Needle* who — »

« Yes. There she is. My God! »

He looked very ill, although when I had said « Hallo George » I had spoken friendly enough.

« I don't see anyone faintly resembling poor Needle, » said Kathleen looking at him. She was worried.

George pointed straight at me. « Look *there*. I tell you that is Needle. »

« You're ill, George. Heavens, you must be seeing things. Come on home. Needle isn't there. You know as well as I do, Needle is dead. »

I must explain that I departed this life nearly five years ago. But I did not altogether depart this world. There were those odd things still to be done which one's executors can never do properly. Papers to be looked over, even after the executors have torn them up. Lots of business except of course on Sundays and Holidays of Obligation, plenty to take an interest in for the time being. I take my recreation on Saturday mornings. If it is a wet Saturday I wander up and down the substantial lanes of Woolworths as I did when I was young and visible. There is a pleasurable spread of objects on the counters which I now perceive and exploit with a certain detachment, since it suits with my condition of life. Creams, toothpastes, combs and hankies, cotton gloves, flimsy flowering scarves, writing paper and crayons, ice-cream cones and orangeade, screwdrivers, boxes of tacks, tins of paint, of glue, of marmalade; I always liked them but far more now that I have no need of any. When Saturdays are fine I go instead to the Portobello Road where formerly I would jaunt with Kathleen in our grown-up days. The barrow-loads do not change much, of apples and rayon vests in common blues and low-taste mauve, of silver plate, trays and teapots long since changed hands from the bygone citizens to dealers, from shops to the new flats and breakable homes, and then over to the barrow-stalls and the dealers again: Georgian spoons, rings, earrings of turquoise and opal set in the butterfly pattern or true-lovers' knot, patch-boxes with miniature paintings of ladies on ivory, snuff boxes of silver with Scotch pebbles inset.

Sometimes as occasion arises on a Saturday morning, my

friend Kathleen who is a Catholic has a Mass said for my soul, and then I am in attendance as it were at the Church. But most Saturdays I take my delight among the solemn crowds with their aimless purposes, their eternal life not far away, who push past the counters and stalls, who handle, buy, steal, touch, desire and ogle the merchandise. I hear the tinkling tills, I hear the jangle of loose change and tongues and children wanting to hold and have.

That is how I came to be in the Portobello Road that Saturday morning when I saw George and Kathleen. I would not have spoken had I not been inspired to it. Indeed it's one of the things I can't do now — to speak out, unless inspired. And most extraordinary, on that morning as I spoke, a degree of visibility set in. I suppose from poor George's point of view it was like seeing a ghost when he saw me standing by the fruit barrow repeating in so friendly a manner, « Hallo George! »

We were bound for the south. When our education, what we could get of it from the north was thought to be finished, one by one we were sent or sent for to London. John Skinner whom we called Skinny went to study more archaeology, George to join his uncle's tobacco firm, Kathleen to stay with her rich connections and to potter intermittently in the Mayfair hat shop which one of them owned. A little later I also went to London to see life, for it was my ambition to write about life, which first I had to see.

« We four must stick together, » George said very often in that yearning way of his. He was always desperately afraid of neglect. We four looked likely to shift off in different directions and George did not trust the other three of us not to forget all about him. More and more as the time came for him to depart for his uncle's tobacco farm in Africa he said

« We four must keep in touch. »

And before he left he told each of us anxiously,

« I'll write regularly, once a month. We must keep

together for the sake of the old times. » He had three prints taken from the negative of that photo on the haystack, wrote on the back of them, « George took this the day that Needle found the needle » and gave us a copy each. I think we all wished he could become a bit more callous.

During my lifetime I was a drifter, nothing organised. It was difficult for my friends to follow the logic of my life. By the normal reckonings I should have come to starvation and ruin, which I never did. Of course I did not live to write about life as I wanted to do. Possibly that is why I am inspired to do so now in these peculiar circumstances.

I taught in a private school in Kensington for almost three months, very small children. I didn't know what to do with them but I was kept fairly busy escorting incontinent little boys to the lavatory and telling the little girls to use their handkerchiefs. After that I lived a winter holiday in London on my small capital, and when that had run out I found a diamond bracelet in the cinema for which I received a reward of fifty pounds. When it was used up I got a job with a publicity man, writing speeches for absorbed industrialists, in which the dictionary of quotations came in very useful. So it went on. I got engaged to Skinny, but shortly after that I was left a small legacy, enough to keep me for six months. This somehow decided me that I didn't love Skinny so I gave him back the ring.

But it was through Skinny that I went to Africa. He was engaged with a party of researchers to investigate King Solomon's mines, that series of ancient workings ranging from the ancient port of Ophir, now called Beira, across Portugese East Africa and Southern Rhodesia to the mighty jungle-city of Zimbabwe, whose temple walls still stand by the approach to an ancient and sacred mountain, where the rubble of that civilisation scatters itself over the surrounding Rhodesian waste. I accompanied the party as a sort of secretary. Skinny vouched for me, he paid my fare, he sympathised by his action with my inconsequential life although when he spoke of it he disapproved. A life like mine was, annoys most people; they

go to their jobs every day, attend to things, give orders, pummel typewriters, and get two or three weeks off every year, and it vexes them to see someone else not bothering to do these things and yet getting away with it, not starving, being lucky as they call it. Skinny, when I had broken off our engagement, lectured me about this, but still he took me to Africa knowing I should probably leave his unit within a few months.

We were there a few weeks before we began enquiring for George who was farming about four hundred miles away to the north. We had not told him of our plans.

« If we tell George to expect us in his part of the world he'll come rushing to pester us the first week. After all, we're going on business, » Skinny had said.

Before we left Kathleen told us, « Give George my love and tell him not to send frantic cables every time I don't answer his letters right away. Tell him I'm busy in the hat shop and being presented. You would think he hadn't another friend in the world the way be carries on. »

We had settled first at Fort Victoria our nearest place of access to the Zimbabwe ruins. There we made enquiries about George. It was clear he hadn't many friends. The older settlers were the most tolerant about the half-caste woman he was living with, as we learned, but they were furious about his methods of raising tobacco which we learned were most unprofessional and in some mysterious way disloyal to the whites. We could never discover how it was that George's style of tobacco farming gave the blacks opinions about themselves, but that's what the older settlers claimed. The newer immigrants thought he was unsociable and of course his living with that nig made visiting impossible.

I must say I was myself a bit off-put by this news about the brown woman. I was brought up in a university town where there were Indian, African and Asiatic students abounding in a variety of tints and hues. I was brought up to avoid them for reasons connected with local reputation and God's ordi-

nances. You cannot easily go against what you were brought up to do unless you are a rebel by nature.

Anyhow, we visited George eventually, taking advantage of the offer of transport from some people bound north in search of game. He had heard of our arrival in Rhodesia and though he was glad, almost relieved, to see us he pursued a policy of sullenness for the first hour.

« We wanted to give you a surprise, George. »

« How were we to know that you'd get to hear of our arrival, George? News here must travel faster than light, George. »

« We did hope to give you a surprise, George. »

At last he said, « Well I must say it's good to see you. All we need now is Kathleen. We four simply must stick together. You find when you're in a place like this, there's nothing like old friends. »

He showed us his drying sheds. He showed us a paddock where he was experimenting with a horse and a zebra mare, attempting to mate them. They were frollicking happily, but not together. They passed each other in their private play time and again, but without acknowledgment and without resentment.

« It's been done before, » George said. « It makes a fine strong beast, more intelligent than a mule and sturdier than a horse. But I'm not having any success with this pair, they won't look at each other. »

After a while he said. « Come in for a drink and meet Matilda. »

She was dark brown, with a subservient hollow chest and round shoulders, a gawky woman, very snappy with the house-boys. We said pleasant things as we drank on the step before dinner, but we found George difficult. For some reason he began to rail me for breaking off my engagement to Skinny, saying what a dirty trick it was after all those good times in the old days. I diverted attention to Matilda. I supposed, I said, she knew this part of the country well?

« No, » said she, « I been a-shellitered my life. I not put

out to working. Me nothing to go from place to place is allowed like dirty girls does. » In her speech she gave every syllable equal stress.

George explained, « Her father was a white magistrate in Natal. She had a sheltered upbringing, different from the other coloureds you realise. »

« Man, me no black-eyed Susan, » said Matilda, « no, no. »

On the whole, George treated her as a servant. She was about four months advanced in pregnancy, but he made her get up and fetch for him, many times. Soap: that was one of the things Matilda had to fetch. George made his own bath soap, showed it proudly, gave us the receipt which I did not trouble to remember; I was fond of nice soaps during my lifetime and George's smelt of brilliantine and looked likely to soil one's skin.

« D'yo brahn? » Matilda asked me.

George said, « She is asking if you go brown in the sun. »

« No, I go freckled. »

« I got sister-in-law go freckles. »

She never spoke another word to Skinny nor to me, and we never saw her again.

Some months later I said to Skinny,

« I'm fed up with being a camp-follower. »

He was not surprised that I was leaving his unit, but he hated my way of expressing it. He gave me a Presbyterian look.

« Don't talk like that. Are you going back to England or staying? »

« Staying, for a while. »

« Well, don't wander too far off. »

I was able to live on the fee I got for writing a gossip column in a local weekly which wasn't my idea of writing about life, of course. I made friends, more than I could cope with, after I left Skinny's exclusive little band of archaeologists. I had the attractions of being newly out from England

and of wanting to see life. Of the countless young men and go-ahead families who purred me along the Rhodesian roads, hundred after hundred miles, I only kept up with one family when I returned to my native land. I think that was because they were the most representative, they stood for all the rest: people in those parts are very typical of each other, as one group of standing stones in that wilderness is like the next.

I met George once more in a hotel in Bulawayo. We drank highballs and spoke of war. Skinny's party were just then deciding whether to remain in the country or return home. They had reached an exciting part of their research, and whenever I got a chance to visit Zimbabwe he would take me for a moonlight walk in the ruined temple and try to make me see phantom Phoenicians flitting ahead of us, or along the walls. I had half a mind to marry Skinny; perhaps, I thought, when his studies were finished. The impeding war was in our bones: so I remarked to George as we sat drinking highballs on the hotel step in the hard bright sunny July winter of that year.

George was inquisitive about my relations with Skinny. He tried to pump me for about half-an-hour and when at last I said, « You are becoming aggressive George, » he stopped. He became quite pathetic. He said, « War or no war I'm clearing out of this. »

« It's the heat does it, » I said.

« I'm clearing out in any case. I've lost a fortune in tobacco. My uncle is making a fuss. It's the other bloody planters, once you get the wrong side of them you're finished in this wide land. »

« What about Matilda? » I asked.

He said, « She'll be all right. She's got hundreds of relatives. »

I had already heard about the baby girl. Coal black, by repute, with George's features. And another on the way, they said.

« What about the child? »

He didn't say anything to that. He ordered more high-

balls and when they arrived he swizzled his for a long time with a stick. « Why didn't you ask me to your twenty-first? » he said then.

« I didn't have anything special, no party George. We had a quiet drink among ourselves George, just Skinny and the old professors and two of the wives and me, George. »

« You didn't ask me to your twenty-first, » he said. « Kathleen writes to me regularly. »

This wasn't true. Kathleen sent me letters fairly often in which she said, « Don't tell George I wrote to you as he will be expecting word from me and I can't be bothered actually. »

« But you, » said George, « don't seem to have any sense of old friendships, you and Skinny. »

« Oh, George! » I said.

« Remember the times we had, » George said. « We used to have times. » His large brown eyes began to water.

« I'll have to be getting along, » I said.

« Please don't go. Don't leave me just yet. I've something to tell you. »

« Something nice? » I laid on an eager smile. All responses to George had to be overdone.

« You don't know how lucky you are » George said.

« How? » I said. Sometimes I got tired of being called lucky by everybody. There were times when, privately practising my writings about life, I knew the bitter side of my fortune. When I failed again and again to reproduce life in some satisfactory and perfect form, I was the more imprisoned, for all my carefree living, within my craving for this satisfaction. Sometimes, in my impotence and need I secreted a venom which infected all my life for days on end and which spurted out indiscriminately on Skinny or on anyone who crossed my path.

« You aren't bound by anyone, » George said. « You come and go as you please. Something always turns up for you. You're free, and you don't know your luck. »

« You're a damn sight more free than I am » I said sharply. « You've got your rich uncle. »

« He's losing interest in me, » George said. « He's had enough. »

« Oh well, you're young yet. What was it you wanted to tell me? »

« A secret, » George said. « Remember we used to have those secrets? »

« Oh, yes we did. »

« Did you ever tell any of mine? »

« Oh no, George. » In reality, I couldn't remember any particular secret out of the dozens we must have exchanged from our schooldays onwards.

« Well this is a secret, mind. Promise not to tell. »

« Promise. »

« I'm married. »

« Married, George! Oh, who to? »

« Matilda. »

« How dreadful! » I spoke before I could think, but he agreed with me.

« Yes it's awful, but what could I do? »

« You might have asked my advice, » I said pompously.

« I'm two years older than you are. I don't ask advice from you Needle, little beast. »

« Don't ask for sympathy then. »

« A nice friend you are, » he said, « I must say after all these years. »

« Poor George! » I said.

« There are three white men to one white woman in this country, » said George. « An isolated planter doesn't see a white woman and if he sees one she doesn't see him. What could I do? I needed the woman. »

I was nearly sick. One, because of my Scottish upbringing. Two, because of my horror of corny phrases like « I needed the woman, » which George repeated twice again.

« And Matilda got tough, » said George, « after you and Skinny came to visit us. She had some friends at the Mission, and she packed up and went to them. »

« You should have let her go, » I said.

« I went after her, » George said. « She insisted on being married, so I married her. »

« That's not a proper secret, then, » I said. « The news of a mixed marriage soon gets about. »

« I took care of that, » George said. « Crazy as I was, I took her to the Congo and married her there. She promised to keep quiet about it. »

« Well you can't clear off and leave her now, surely, » I said.

« I'm going to get out of this place. I can't stand the woman and I can't stand the country. I didn't realise what it would be like. Two years of the country and three months of my wife has been enough. »

« Will you get a divorce? »

« No, Matilda's Catholic. She won't divorce. »

George was fairly getting through the highballs, and I wasn't far behind him. His brown eyes floated shiny and liquid as he told me how he had written to tell his uncle of his plight, « Except of course, I didn't say we were married, that would have been too much for him. He's a prejudiced hardened old Colonial. I only said I'd had a child by a coloured woman and was expecting another, and he perfectly understood. He came at once by plane a few weeks ago. He's made a settlement on her, providing she keeps her mouth shut about her association with me. »

« Will she do that? »

« Oh, yes, or she won't get the money. »

« But as your wife she has a claim on you, in any case. »

« If she claimed as my wife she'd get far less. Matilda knows what she's doing, greedy bitch she is. She'll keep her mouth shut. »

« Only, you won't be able to marry again, will you George? »

« Not unless she dies, » he said. « And she's as strong as a trek ox. »

« Well, I'm sorry George, » I said.

« Good of you to say so, » he said. « But I can see by

your chin that you disapprove of me. Even my old uncle understood. »

« Oh, George I quite understand. You were lonely, I suppose. »

« You didn't even ask me to your twenty-first. If you and Skinny had been nicer to me, I would never have lost my head and married the woman, never. »

« You didn't ask me to your wedding, » I said.

« You're a catty bisson, Needle, not like what you were in the old times when you used to tell us your wee stories. »

« I'll have to be getting along, » I said.

« Mind you keep the secret, » George said.

« Can't I tell Skinny? He would be very sorry for you George. »

« You mustn't tell anyone. Keep it a secret. Promise. »

« Promise, » I said. I understood that he wished to enforce some sort of bond between us with this secret, and I thought, « Oh well, I suppose he's lonely keeping his secret won't do any harm. »

I returned to England with Skinny's party before the war.

I did not see George again till just before my death, five years ago.

After the war Skinny returned to his studies. He had two more exams, over a period of eighteen months, and I thought I might marry him when the exams were over.

« You might do worse than Skinny, » Kathleen used to say to me on our Saturday morning excursions to the antique shops and the junk stalls.

She too was getting on in years. The remainder of our families in Scotland were hinting that it was time we settled down with husbands. Kathleen was a little younger than me, but looked much older. She knew her chances were diminishing but at that time I did not think she cared very much. As for myself, the main attraction of marrying Skinny was his prospective expeditions in Mesopotamia. My desire to marry

him had to be stimulated by the continual reading of books about Babylon and Assyria; perhaps Skinny felt this, because he supplied the books and even started instructing me in the art of deciphering cuneiform tables.

Kathleen was more interested in marriage than I thought. Like me, she had racketed around a good deal during the war; she had actually been engaged to an officer in the U.S. Navy, who was killed. Now she kept an antique shop near Lambeth, was doing very nicely, lived in a Chelsea square, but for all that she must have wanted to be married and have children. She would stop and look into all the prams which the mothers had left outside shops or area gates.

« The poet Swinburne used to do that, » I told her once

« Really? Did he want children of his own? »

« I shouldn't think so. He simply liked babies. »

Before Skinny's final exam he fell ill and was sent to a sanatorium in Switzerland.

« You're fortunate after all not to be married to him, » Kathleen said. « You might have caught T.B. »

I was fortunate, I was lucky... so everyone kept telling me on occasions. Although it annoyed me to hear, I knew they were right, but in a way that was different from what they meant. It took me very small effort to make a living; book reviews, odd jobs for Kathleen, a few months with the publicity man again, still getting up speeches about literature, art and life for industrial tycoons. I was waiting to write about life and it seemed to me that the good fortune lay in this, whenever it should be. And until then I was assured of my charmed life, the necessities of existence always coming my way, and I with far more leisure than anyone else. I thought of my type of luck after I became a Catholic and was being confirmed. The Bishop touches the candidate on the cheek, a symbolic reminder of the sufferings a Christian is supposed to undertake. I thought, how lucky, what a feathery symbol to stand for the hellish violence of its true meaning.

I visited Skinny twice in the two years that he was in

the sanatorium. He was almost cured, and expected to be home within a few months. I told Kathleen after my last visit,

« Maybe I'll marry Skinny when he's well again. »

« Make it definite, Needle, and not so much of the maybe. You don't know when you're well off, » she said.

This was five years ago, in the last year of my life. Kathleen and I had become very close friends. We met several times each week, and after our Saturday morning excursions in the Portobello Road very often I would accompany Kathleen to her aunt's house in Kent for a long week-end.

One day in the June of that year I met Kathleen specially for lunch because she had phoned me to say she had news.

« Guess who came into the shop this afternoon, » she said.

« Who? »

« George. »

We had half imagined George was dead. We had received no letters in the past ten years. Early in the war we had heard rumours of his keeping a night club in Durban, but nothing after that. We could have made enquiries if we had felt moved to do so.

At one time, when we discussed him, Kathleen had said,

« I ought to get in touch with poor George. But then I think he would write back. He would demand a regular correspondence again. »

« We four must stick together, » I mimicked.

« I can visualise his reproachful limpid orbs, » Kathleen said.

Skinny said, « He's probably gone native. With his coffee concubine and a dozen mahogany kids. »

« Perhaps he's dead, » Kathleen said.

I did not speak of George's marriage, nor any of his confidences in the hotel at Bulawayo. As the years passed we ceased to mention him except in passing, as someone more or less dead so far as we were concerned.

Kathleen was excited about George's turning up. She had forgotten her impatience with him in former days; she said,

« It was so wonderful to see old George. He seems to need a friend, feels neglected, out of touch with things. »

« He needs mothering, I suppose. »

Kathleen didn't notice the malice. She declared, « That's exactly the case with George. It always has been, I can see it now. »

She seemed ready to come to any rapid new and happy conclusion about George. In the course of the morning he had told her of his wartime night club in Durban, his game-shooting expeditions since. It was clear he had not mentioned Matilda. He had put on weight, Kathleen told me, but he could carry it.

I was curious to see this version of George, but I was leaving for Scotland next day and did not see him till September of that year just before my death.

While I was in Scotland I gathered from Kathleen's letters that she was seeing George very frequently, finding enjoyable company in him, looking after him. « You'll be surprised to see how he has developed. » Apparently he would hang round Kathleen in her shop most days, « it makes him feel useful, » she maternally expressed it. He had an old relative in Kent whom he visited at weekends; this old lady lived a few miles from Kathleen's aunt, which made it easy for them to travel down together on Saturdays, and go for long country walks.

« You'll see such a difference in George, » Kathleen said on my return to London in September. I was to meet him that night, a Saturday. Kathleen's aunt was abroad, the maid on holiday, and I was to keep Kathleen company in the empty house.

George had left London for Kent a few days earlier. « He's actually helping with the harvest down there! » Kathleen told me lovingly.

Kathleen and I had planned to travel down together, but on that Saturday she was unexpectedly delayed in London on some business. It was arranged that I should go ahead of her

in the early afternoon to see to the provisions for our party; Kathleen had invited George to dinner at her aunt's house that night.

« I should be with you by seven, » she said. « Sure you won't mind the empty house? I hate arriving at empty houses, myself. »

I said no, I liked an empty house.

So I did, when I got there. I had never found the house more likeable. A large Georgian vicarage in about eight acres, most of the rooms shut and sheeted, there being only one servant. I discovered that I wouldn't need to go shopping, Kathleen's aunt had left many and delicate supplies with notes attached to them: « Eat this up please do, see also fridge » and « A treat for three hungry people see also 2 bttles beaune for yr party on back kn table. » It was like a treasure hunt as I followed clue after clue through the cool silent domestic quarters. A house in which there are no people — but with all the signs of tenancy — can be a most tranquil good place. People take up space in a house out of proportion to their size. On my previous visits I had seen the rooms overflowing as it seemed, with Kathleen, her aunt, and the little fat maidservant; they were always on the move. As I wandered through that part of the house which was in use, opening windows to let in the pale yellow air of September, I was not conscious that I, Needle, was taking up any space at all, I might have been a ghost.

The only thing to be fetched was the milk. I waited till after four when the milking should be done, then set off for the farm which lay across two fields at the back of the orchard. There, when the byreman was handing me the bottle, I saw George.

« Hallo George, » I said.

« Needle! what are you doing here? » he said.

« Fetching milk, » I said.

« So am I. Well, it's good to see you I must say. »

As we paid the farm hand, George said, « I'll walk back

with you part of the way. But I mustn't stop, my old cousin's without any milk for her tea. How's Kathleen? »

« She was kept in London. She's coming on later, about seven, she expects. »

We had reached the end of the first field. George's way led to the left and on to the main road.

« We'll see you tonight, then? » I said.

« Yes, and talk about old times. »

« Grand, » I said.

But George got over the stile with me.

« Look here, » he said. « I'd like to talk to you, Needle. »

« We'll talk tonight, George. Better not keep your cousin waiting for the milk. » I found myself speaking to him almost as if he were a child.

« No, I want to talk to you alone. This is a good opportunity. »

We began to cross the second field. I had been hoping to have the house to myself for a couple more hours and I was rather petulant.

« See, » he said suddenly, « that haystack. »

« Yes, » I said absently.

« Let's sit there and talk. I'd like to see you up on a haystack again. I still keep that photo. Remember that time when — »

« I found the needle, » I said very quickly, to get it over.

But I was glad to rest. The stack had been broken up, but we managed to find a nest in it. I buried my bottle of milk in the hay for coolness. George placed his carefully at the foot of the stack.

« My old cousin is terribly vague, poor soul. A bit hazy in her head. She hasn't the least sense of time. If I tell her I've only been gone ten minutes she'll believe it. »

I giggled, and looked at him. His face had grown much larger, his lips full, wide and with a ripe colour that is strange in a man. His brown eyes were abounding as before with some inarticulate plea.

« So you're going to marry Skinny after all these years? »

« I really don't know, George. »

« You played him up properly. »

« It isn't for you to judge. I have my own reasons for what I do. »

« Don't get sharp, » he said, « I was only funning. » To prove it, he lifted a tuft of hay and brushed my face with it.

« D'you know, » he said next, « I didn't think you and Skinny treated me very decently in Rhodesia. »

« Well, we were busy, George. And we were younger then, we had a lot to do and see. After all, we could see you any other time, George. »

« A touch of selfishness, » he said.

« I'll have to be getting along, George. » I made to get down from the stack.

He pulled me back. « Wait, I've got something to tell you. »

« O.K. George, tell me. »

« First promise not to tell Kathleen. She wants it kept a secret so that she can tell you herself. »

« All right. Promise. »

« I'm going to marry Kathleen. »

« But you're already married. »

Sometimes I heard news of Matilda from the one Rhodesian family with whom I still kept up. They referred to her as « George's Dark Lady » and of course they did not know he was married to her. She had apparently made a good thing out of George, they said, for she minced around all tarted up, never did a stroke of work and was always unsettling the respectable coloured girls in their neighbourhood. According to accounts, she was a living example of the follv of behaving as George did.

« I married Matilda in the Congo, » George was saying.

« It would still be bigamy, » I said.

He was furious when I used that word bigamy. He lifted a handful of hay as if he would throw it in my face, but controlling himself meanwhile he fanned it at me playfully.

« I'm not sure that the Congo marriage was valid, » he continued. « Anyway, as far as I'm concerned, it isn't. »

« You can't do a thing like that, » I said.

« I need Kathleen. She's been decent to me. I think we were always meant for each other, me and Kathleen. »

« I'll have to be going, » I said.

But he put his knee over my ankles, so that I couldn't move. I sat still and gazed into space.

He tickled my face with a wisp of hay.

« Smile up, Needle, » he said, « let's talk like old times. »

« Well? »

« No-one knows about my marriage to Matilda except you and me. »

« And Matilda, » I said.

« She'll hold her tongue so long as she gets her payments. My uncle left an annuity for the purpose, his lawyers see to it. »

« Let me go, George. »

« You promised to keep it a secret, » he said, « you promised. »

« Yes, I promised. »

« And now that you're going to marry Skinny, we'll be properly coupled off as we should have been years ago. We should have been — but youth! — our youth got in the way, didn't it? »

« Life got in the way, » I said.

« But everything's going to be all right now. You'll keep my secret, won't you? You promised. » He had released my feet. I edged a little further from him.

I said, « If Kathleen intends to marry you, I shall tell her that you're already married. »

« You wouldn't do a dirty trick like that, Needle? You're going to be happy with Skinny, you wouldn't stand in the way of my, — »

« I must, Kathleen's my best friend, » I said swiftly.

He looked as if he would murder me and he did, he stuffed hay into my mouth until it could hold no more, kneeling on my body to keep it prone, holding both my wrists tight in his huge left hand. I saw the red full lines of his mouth and the white slit of his teeth last thing on earth. Not another

soul passed by as he pressed my body into the stack, as he made a deep nest for me, tearing up the hay to make a groove the length of my corpse, and finally piling the warm dry stuff in a mound over this concealment, so natural-looking in a broken haystack. Then George climbed down, took up his bottle of milk and went his way. I suppose that was why he looked so unwell when I stood, nearly five years later, by the barrow in the Portobello Road and said in easy tones, « Hallo George! »

The Haystack Murder was one of the notorious crimes of that year.

My friends said, « A girl who had everything to live for. »

After a search that lasted twenty hours, when my body was found, the evening papers said, « 'Needle' is found: in haystack! »

Kathleen, speaking from that Catholic point of view which takes some getting used to said, « She was at Confession only the day before she died — wasn't she lucky? »

The poor byre-hand who sold us the milk was grilled for hour after hour by the local police, and later by Scotland Yard. So was George. He admitted walking as far as the haystack with me, but he denied lingering there.

« You hadn't seen your friend for ten years? » the Inspector asked him.

« That's right, » said George.

« And you didn't stop to have a chat? »

« No. We'd arranged to meet later at dinner. My cousin was waiting for the milk, I couldn't stop. »

The old soul, his cousin, swore that he hadn't been gone more than ten minutes in all, and she believed it to the day of her death a few months later. There was the microscopic evidence of hay on George's jacket, of course, but the same evidence was on every man's jacket in the district that fine harvest year. Unfortunately, the byreman's hands were even brawnier and mightier than George's. The marks on my wrists

had been done by such hands, so the laboratory charts indicated when my post-mortem was all completed. But the wrist-marks weren't enough to pin down the crime to either man. If I hadn't been wearing my long-sleeved cardigan, it was said, the bruises might have matched up properly with someone's fingers.

Kathleen, to prove that George had absolutely no motive, told the police that she was engaged to him. George thought this a little foolish. They checked up on his life in Africa, right back to his living with Matilda. But the marriage didn't come out — who would think of looking up registers in the Congo? Not that this would have proved any motive for murder. All the same, George was relieved when the enquiries were over without the marriage to Matilda being disclosed. He was able to have his nervous breakdown at the same time married, long after the police had shifted their enquiries to an Air Force camp five miles from Kathleen's aunt's home. Only a lot of excitement and drinks came of those investigations. The Haystack Murder was one of the unsolved crimes that year.

Shortly afterwards the byre-hand emigrated to Canada to start afresh, with the help of Skinny who felt sorry for him.

After seeing George taken away home by Kathleen that Saturday in the Portobello Road, I thought that perhaps I might be seeing more of him in similar circumstances. The next Saturday I looked out for him, and at last there he was, without Kathleen, half-worried, half-hopeful.

I dashed his hopes, I said, « Hallo George! »

He looked in my direction, rooted in the midst of the flowing market-mongers in that convivial street. I thought to myself, « He looks as if he had a mouthful of hay. » It was the new bristly maize-coloured beard and moustache surrounding his great mouth suggested the thought, gay and lyrical as life.

« Hallo George! » I said again.

I might have been inspired to say more on that agreeable

morning, but he didn't wait. He was away down a side street and along another street and down one more, zig-zag, as far and as devious as he could take himself from the Portobello Road.

Neverthless he was back again next week. Poor Kathleen had brought him in her car. She left it at the top of the street, and got out with him, holding him tight by the arm. It grieved me to see Kathleen ignoring the spread of scintillations on the stalls. I had myself seen a charming Battersea box quite to her taste, also a pair of enamelled silver earrings. But she took no notice of these wares, clinging close to George, and, poor Kathleen — I hate to say how she looked.

And George! » I said, « you don't look at all well, George. »

« Look! » said George, « Over there by the hardwear barrow. That's Needle. »

Kathleen was crying. « Come back home, dear, » she said.

« Oh, you don't look well, George! » I said.

They took him to a nursing home. He was fairly quiet, except on Saturday mornings when they had a hard time of it to keep him indoors and away from the Portobello Road.

But a couple of months later he did escape. It was a Monday.

They searched for him in the Portobello Road, but actually he had gone off to Kent to the village near the scene of the Haystack Murder. There he went to the police and gave himself up, but they could tell from the way he was talking that there was something wrong with the man.

« I saw Needle in the Portobello Road three Saturdays running, » he explained, « and they put me in a private ward but I got away while the nurses were seeing to the new patient. You remember the murder of Needle, well I did it. Now you know the truth, and that will keep bloody Needle's mouth shut. »

Dozens of poor mad fellows confess to every murder. The police obtained an ambulance to take him back to the nursing home. He wasn't there long. Kathleen gave up her shop and

devoted herself to looking after him at home. But she found that the Saturday mornings were a strain. He insisted on going to see me in the Portobello Road and would come back to insist that he'd murdered Needle. Once he tried to tell her something about Matilda, but Kathleen was so kind and solicitous, I don't think he had the courage to remember what he had to say.

Skinny had always been rather reserved with George since the murder. But he was kind to Kathleen. It was he who persuaded them to emigrate to Canada so that George should be well out of reach of the Portobello Road.

George has recovered somewhat in Canada but of course he will never be the old George again, as Kathleen writes to Skinny. « That Haystack tragedy did for George, » she writes. « I feel sorrier for George sometimes than I am for poor Needle. But I do often have Masses said for Needle's soul. »

I doubt if George will ever see me again in the Portobello Road. He broods much over the crumpled snapshot he took of us on the haystack. Kathleen does not like the photograph, I don't wonder. For my part, I consider it quite a jolly snap, but I don't think we were any of us so lovely as we look in it, gazing blatantly over the ripe cornfields, Skinny with his humorous expression, I secure in my difference from the rest, Kathleen with her head prettily perched on her hand, each reflecting fearlessly in the face of George's camera the glory of the world, as if it would never pass.

RUTH PITTER

PERSEPHONE

There in the dark thou hast bestowed thy brightness,
Watching with me in divine hope and patience.
The high gods with their shining shame my dimness,
Age takes me soon and I am bowed before them,
Formless and squalid in death's filthy garment.
But thou, who art not dim beside the brightest,
Knowest my livery, for thou hast worn it:
In thy great mystery my magic cycle
Thou dost present, and in my cycle surely
Thy mystery I prove unto thy worship,
And from bare grain into the heavenly body
Arise, as in dread books is plainly written,
And by dread voices beyond death is spoken,
And by dread spirits to the soul is proven.
When the poor needy flesh is still a moment,
When the unquiet mind forsakes her clamour,
The awful whisper sighs through the quiet temple,
The inner oracle proclaims the triumph,
And lovely in eternal spring thou risest.

Now at the very heart of winter, earth
Seems dead; now all her lively streams stand still,
The wind's breath ceases, and the ashy snow

Whispering descends, and veils the stiffened clay.
Now the starved beast, coiled in his cave asleep,
Breathes at long intervals and longer, then
Shudders but once, as sleep unites with death.
Flowers are but memory; the ragged stem
Stands lifeless, and all hope lies in the root.
Frost strike no deeper! One inch more, farewell
Promise of resurrection, and farewell
Spring, and new beauty, and the precious seed,
The fruit of all; but roots are quiet in earth,
Feel not the pang of frost, but fast asleep
Await the rising, or unknowing die;
Leave them to heaven, to slay them or to spare.
Heaven is intent upon them: yonder Zeus
Gazes on earth, and everywhere sees death,
Hueless and naked stillness: by the rock
Frozen and senseless sees the Mother lie.
May pity move the gods? pity is man's,
Compunction towards the weaker from the weak;
The immortal mind who searches? but Zeus turns,
And upon Hermes looks, and nods command.
As the sea-swallow from the dizzy cliff
Launches her lightning wing, and shears the wind
With steely gleam, forth leapt the flying god,
Shot from Olympus like a meteor, fell
Through air, through cloud, and sank below the earth
As Hesper plunges underneath the sea.

But winter will recede: O not for ever
Sleeps the sown grain there in the grave; the earth
Is warmed, and it must upward. Let her hear,
Let her discern the summons; she has lain
Long for our sake under the heavy ground.
It is full time; the trumpet calls on her.
Far in the nether dark, it seemed her soul
Uttered a solitary note, a pearl
Of sound dropped in the subterranean sea

Of silence; and incredulous, her ear
She lent, and thirsted for the voice again.
She mistook not: in silence' lap now fell
Three liquid drops, as when the lonely bird
From her umbrageous oak salutes the night,
And for her prelude the soft trinity
Of sound lets fall. Amazed the goddess hears;
Hears her own spirit in the black abyss
Striking sweet echo from the awful dark.
A long, loud warble wakens: then a quick
And throbbing note recalls her late alarms:
Now like a bugle over all the dead
The full song mounts, and in her breast awakes
Knowledge again, and nobly marches forth
Triumph with all her banners, and the voice
Of vindicated honour soars from hell.
The divine hearts reclaims its heaven; at last
Of her long travail she is satisfied,
Knows herself victress: ay, and more than all,
Glories in wisdom heaped, in knowledge stored,
The golden granary of grief and pain.
All mystery lies open; now she sees
Clear through the core of being; now she knows
How the immortal gods are justified
And life is crowned for ever. Well mayest thou sing,
That to the lees hast drunk the dreadful cup
Of death, and found the elixir of life,
Queen of our fields and pattern of our fate!

Perfect in knowledge, beyond knowledge wise,
Proud of her victory, renewed by death,
By death enlightened and initiate,
She saw and loved: and Dis held forth his hand,
Proffering, with a look that almost seemed
Humble and yearning, the pale glimmering sphere,
The fair pomegranate, from whose golden rind
Burst the clear rubies' sacrificial gems,

Brighter than the soft flower on the same bough,
Whose rosy petals from the scarlet urn
Of the young fruit arising, proclaimed love
Victor of anguish; and the solemn leaves,
Pointed and dark, great wisdom's tribute paid.
She hungered and she thirsted; forthwith took
With human gratitude, celestial grace,
The orb that made her empress of the shades,
The fruit that slaked her longing, that assuaged
Her dearest need with an eternal wine,
And from the rock of sorrow struck for her
Sweet fountains filled for ever. Heavenly tears,
The overflow of that pure Helicon,
Bathed her immortal visage, brightening it
Even till the awful beauty blazed afar
Over the shadowy empire, from whose stones
The answering diamond shone, and scaly gold;
From whose dark woods the strange unvernal blooms
Gleamed a mysterious challenge to the mind,
And lambent-eyed and silent, the white owl
Fled forth illumined, like a lovely ghost.
The night put off her terror, and assumed
Sweetness, was secretly hospitable,
The cloak of sorrow, sorrow's remedy,
Darkly maternal and forgiving night!

But ancient earth awaits thee; rise and go.
The trees, that seem like heavenly presences,
Long for thee: send up to their mighty hearts
The wine of resurrection, crowning them
Each with his proper beauty: willow pale
With wealthy yellow for the thronging bees,
And sweet though barren silver: the broad oak
With cover that invites the nightingale,
The beech with all her young pellucid leaves,
The poplar with her incense, and the dark
Cedar, that scorns the winter, with new cones

Upright emerging from his level boughs.
Fair in their several kinds and purposes,
Nourish them all; for they are reverend,
Ancient, and earlier than gods or men.
Their legend is upon them; thou canst read;
Expound, and teach us how the thought emerged
From chaos, as from furnaces the coin
Stamped cleanly with the image of the king.

The Mother bowed herself, and from the earth
Mutely adored the proven deity;
No cherished babe, given back by fate reversed,
But all life crowned, and in full cycle raised
Up to an awful splendour, fate fulfilled.
Her babe had gone down to the dreadful grave
For ever; and the presence that returned,
The same and not the same, seeming to be
Death reconciled with immortality,
Awed and perplexed the mighty soul of earth,
Whose reason is divided: light and dark,
And life and death, and good and evil are
Parted to her, and now she knew them one.
Men saw the splendour bursting from the hill;
Near as they dared, they came, and at the foot
Of the blest valley pausing, there set up
Their altar, and adoring sacrificed:
The rumour flew, and now from far and near
Came all who might, and passed before the cave
Rejoicing, and laid down their offering there.

Goddess, among thy loves number these people,
Teach them the triumph of thy returning flowers,
And triumph's sister, the dark half of wisdom,
How to depart like flowers and to be nothing,
Loss that doth purchase all, love that embraceth
Night and the grave, all that such men call sorrow.

Night shall come down, but not upon the spirit:
Winter shall fall, but not the old despair:
Death take them, as by love he is permitted,
But forth again shall breathe them. See, great goddess,
A brightness flies in air, flashes and hovers:
It is my soul, that in the iron chariot
Plunged to the grave with thee, and shared in darkness
Thy long despair and anguish; heard the summons,
Awoke with thee to love, for love of wisdom
Wept with thee; then like to the star of morning
Swam above earth, and saw the high celestial
Pomp of eternal dayspring: now in gladness
And reassured for ever, in the purple
Air of the vernal eve, lo where she sings,
Her sad-hued plume reflecting the blue zenith
And red horizon, and her accents praising
Thee, and in thee the hierarchy of heaven.

NORMAN LEVINE

A SABBATH WALK

'Knocked down by a motor car in the street
molested in the high road
boys sent in a train
boys in a Sunday meeting
boys sent in the path that leads to Tregenna
and watched in the street everywhere
and no rest in my house
I had to stay home and I could not listen
to it no longer
so it's years since
I have been anywhere
and through stans at my door
and as I opened my door a stan
Past over my head and went in the kitchen
an if I was a bit taller
it would have took me in the face and eyes.'

When he passed the condemned cottages and reached the first intersection, he knew that now that he had walked this far, he would not turn back. He had always found this short distance down Ayr Lane, difficult. The cobble stones were wet today. A steady but light stream of water continued to move over them. But there was something in his hesitancy

not caused by the hazards of the weather. He was certain that no one, not even old Mrs. Hocking with her shaking-head would have any reason to be outdoors at this hour; yet these houses, now silent and well mannered with their curtains drawn, could not erase the jeers and the loud laughter that came from them whenever he tried to walk by during the day. Often the children, encouraged by their parents, would throw stones at him. He did not mind the stones so much, but when they made fun of him, the way he walked and what he wore, laughed at him whenever he appeared, followed him as a chorus, chanting

Crazy Alfred Adams
Crazy Alfred Adams

he wanted to be able to run again, to run away from the noise, back to his cottage and lock the door. There he would remain all week. Only on Saturday mornings would he come out, just as he came out this morning, nervous and afraid, and walk to the harbour carrying that large empty pail.

The sky was gray when he came to the first crossing. On his left the *Palais de Danse* with its green closed doors and a few painted signs flag-waving with the wind, was deserted. To the right, down Barnoon Hill, he watched and heard no noise. Satisfied, he looked up at the church tower standing higher than the houses. The small handle of the clock looked like a heart as it pointed past the seven. He passed garbage cans standing by stone steps, filled high, pushing up their Chinese coolie-hat tops. He was tired when he entered Fore Street and walked towards and rested against the red pillar box. From this position he could see the entire street before it turned into the harbour. The milkman had already placed his bottles of milk on the stone steps leading to the door of the blue-painted cafe. One small bottle was sheltered beside *St. Peter's Finger;* by the pub's entrance, a bottle of milk somehow did not look incongruous. The bakery shop, the stationers, the fruit-merchants, and the restaurants were empty.

Fore Street had an angelic look. Everything was quiet. A gull cried. Alfred Adams looked down beside his resting-place and saw that a dog had been there before him.

Cautiously he crossed over and found an entrance in the white wall of the street. Stone steps led down. He walked down the steps. And as he walked he began to see the sea through the opening in the wall, as through a telescope. As he moved down towards the far opening of the tunnel, everything around him seemed to suddenly come into focus: the light on the pier, the noise of the gulls and the sharp sound of water running down one of the pipes outside a house. He could see and hear the water as it ran into a drain clogged with cigarette ends and blocked with paper. He heard the sound of the sea and the gulls long before he came through that passage-way between the houses. He knew that this would be his last hiding-place before arriving at Stig's. Now he would have to leave the shelter of houses and tunnels and walk the full length of the harbour front, alone. He hesitated, not only from fear, but because here, before him, was the place he knew and loved; the brooding fishing village where he was born.

When young he sailed in the small boats in the Atlantic and sometimes up to the North Sea. So much of his life was spent fishing. Then, when he became too old for those long days and nights, he remained on land buying scrap iron, sails, rope, odds and ends of all kinds from the boats. He did not mind then when children followed him. For he lived by himself. He found that loneliness was not the same on water as on the land. For the sea, just as this harbour, gave him something which the land could not give: a feeling of belonging. But that was all before. Now when a gale would turn towards the land so that the water ran upwards into the street, or the rain would come down so heavy that few people would be outside, he would go to the harbour and look for a longtime at the water coming in with force, pushing its way towards the land, with the wind blowing the spray back in white sheets. And though he would get wet and sometimes

cough, he felt cleansed from the hate of the people in the village. He wondered why they were against him. He had little to do with any of them. Except for Mrs. Jacobs. And he knew now, as from yesterday, that even she could not be trusted. Never again would he eat any of her dinners, but throw it down into the gutter. And why did Mrs. Jacobs want to poison him? And what about the others? They laughed when he said that he heard voices coming down chimney. « How could you hear them, Alfred » said Mrs. Jacobs when she brought him his bottle of milk, « when you're quite deaf and can hardly hear when I'm shouting? »

But he did hear.

He heard what they were all saying about him.

He woke us up with his raving again last night. He's more often like that now. But quite harmless.

It's no use my going in. He'll only tell me to clear out!

So he was at it again, the other night, his face sweating, jabbering to himself, crouched in front of the grate.

O leave him be. Nobody wants him.

But he knew that it wasn't because of the voices that they laughed at him. Or because he slept in an old wooden box as far away from the chimney as possible. He knew that they were against him because he remained in his cottage all week, and painted. Not like those real painters who went to school and had studios facing the sea and put up their boards in the street or in the sand in the harbour. But using the sides of old cardboard boxes and ordinary ship's paint, he would paint the ships that he remembered. And sometimes he would paint this harbour. For he knew the harbour as few people living in the village knew it. He knew it as a home to which he would return after spending days at sea, watching it roll out to meet him, warm and friendly as a

mother. He knew the streets from his walks through the streets asking for scrap iron. In his damp cottage, he painted what he remembered. He would paint all week, then on Sundays he would place newspapers over his paintings and put them away. He would spend the rest of that day sitting in the wooden box which he used as a bed and read the Bible with a large magnifying glass.

But now the tide was almost in. Most of the boats were upright, floating. A few of the larger ones still lay on their sides, resting in the sand. Near the far side of the quay he could see a policeman walking. The water was now almost high enough to cover the sandbar that lay like an animal across the harbour's mouth. Alfred Adams came out from the opening in the wall. Sounds of voices came from the *Harbour Cafe.* Women were talking loudly as they washed the floor. He walked over to the harbour railing. Gulls wailed mournfully. He smelt the sea and the seaweed that the tide brought in and around the stones and ropes that held the boats. The water was very clear. He could see the bottom. And the gulls swam up to the edge of the water where the stone rose sharply. The water was not completely in, and they began to walk as soon as they could feel the bottom with their legs.

The old man carrying that large pail in his right hand continued to walk along the front as rapidly as his age allowed him. Sometimes he would look ahead, as if for assurance, trying to shorten that distance that he still had to walk, then, frightened, he would turn his head and scrutinize the holes in the walls beside the harbour cafes, or where openings led into streets between Fore Street and the front. A gull from the top of the Grill Bar perched on the stone roof, bent his head at him and with closed beak, whined. Some French sailors in their rust coloured oilers were rowing out in a rowboat around the pierhead towards the deep water and their boats. He looked at the sides and at the stairs of the *Copper Kettle.* No one was there. No one was hiding against the wall of the harbour, or in the dark entrances still kept

dark by a gray sky. Soon it would all be over. Soon he knew he would end this walk and be able to sit down where it was warm, and rest. His pail would be filled with his week's supply of cardboard and paint. He would talk, drink hot coffee and smoke his pipe with Stig. And after he had rested and collected his supplies, he knew that Stig would take him back to the cottage. That together they would walk along the harbour front, by now filled with the movement of people, dogs, cats and carts; through Fore Street with its crowded shops, until they reached Ayr Lane. The postman and the fisherman would be out, and there would be that Saturday crowd at the Slipway where the fish lay in those large wicker baskets, being auctioned off. And he would walk different now. Gone would be that nervousness and feeling of being hunted. There was no need to walk frightened with Stig beside him. Stig was strong and they liked Stig. They drank with him in *St. Peter's Finger* and sang with him at night by the harbour rails underneath the light. For Stig was an attraction for tourists. His paintings and sculptures were known far past this fishing village. The many tourists who came in summer with their cameras and filled the streets flowing with ice-creams, sand-shovels, and blonde-bleached faces, would often take photographs of Stig as he walked through the streets. Sometimes young students would come to the village and take the same walk as he was now taking to Stig's Tower, and there Stig would answer their questions and show them around his workshop. And the old man walking alone along the front knew that even now Stig would be waiting, brewing the coffee. He always looked forward to these Saturday mornings. No matter what the weather — even when the gale warning was flying black from the top of the hill — old Alfred Adams always arrived at Stig's Tower, exhausted and sometimes cold, with his pail empty; then returned with Stig, his pail full, and with a feeling of warmth that came from

the hot coffee, the talk, and the walk back together. In anticipation of all this, the old man quickened his pace.

Unknown to the old man, three boys lay close together behind a large freshly painted boat overturned near the *Lobster Pot*. They crouched unnaturally together, watching the moving figure. One of them, a tall dark boy with a small dirty face, said in a whisper. « Let him pass. » The other two at first did not understand their leader's order. The second in command, also dark with cheeks round almost as circles and with thin lips, wondered at this variation in the morning's tactics. The smallest crouched timidly beside the boat, frightened of the leader, huddled behind the second in command, afraid of doing something wrong. The eyes behind the boat watched the old man look towards their hiding-place and saw that frightened face explore the crevices around them. This was the only part of the performance which was still a game, for if he did see them: What then? What would he do? But the old man appeared more interested in continuing his journey than finding what he was looking for. When he passed the boat, the leader pushed out from the hiding-place. The other two followed.

The tall boy had large stones in both hands. The others carried sticks as well as stones. And as the morning began to lift itself from the harbour, as activities started here and there — a small cart with a horse standing wheel-deep by a boat, the men throwing fish from the boat to the wheeled cart with iron hooks, while an old woman stood with a large pail on the small road scraping manure — this little drama of age and youth continued to stalk along the waterfront.

The old man either sensed the danger behind him, or knew from past experience what to expect. As the boys closed in, and he turned to meet them, a look almost of acceptance came across his face. The stones hit the old man in the face and the body. He tried to shield himself with the empty pail, but this action allowed one of them to rush in close and

hit him in the legs with his stick and knock him down. As soon as they saw that he was down, they jumped on top of him and began to strike him with their fists shouting. « Crazy old man. Crazy old man. Seeing ghosts are you? » And because he offered little resistance they began to abuse him. One lifted up the old man's sweater so that his fists could strike the flesh. Another tried to pull off the baggy trousers. The tall boy attempted to take the empty pail, but Alfred Adams held on with both hands, so that after a while, the boy lost interest in the pail and kicked the old man in the stomach. The second in command followed the leader's example and kicked the stomach again and again. But the smallest boy could only watch. He just stood there, slightly quivering, and watched the others kick the man and hit him with the sticks until the blood came. At first, the other two did not notice that the small one was not joining in. The leader was the first to sense that someone was standing behind him.

He turned around.

« What's wrong with you? »

The young one remained silent.

« Come here! »

The young one seemed to be hypnotized with fear.

The leader was just about to hit him when the second in command burst out laughing. « Look at that will you. He's pee'd in his pants again. »

And now the leader also saw the small trickle and the wetness. The small one began to run away. The others turned quickly to the old man on the ground. The leader picked up the cap from the road and began to chase the young one. The second in command looked at the old man, kicked him again in the stomach, and followed his leader.

Old Alfred Adams pushed himself up, picked up his pail, wiped his nose with his hand, and continued to walk. He walked differently now. There was no need to look in the shadows. What he had expected, had happened. Just as it had happened almost every Saturday morning. A toothless man came out of the Tregenna Cafe carrying a large pail of

rubbish to the side of the harbour rails. He threw the garbage into the harbour. Soon gulls left the roofs and the sand and flew towards the spot. The man noticed Alfred walking unsteadily, his clothes disarranged and dirt on his face. He began to laugh. The toothless mouth looked black. « What's wrong Alfred, little ghosts again, or were they little devils this time? » But the old man walked on in silence. He did not stop for a drink from the water fountain near the Slipway. He walked, leaning forward, not looking at the wall of the harbour front. It did not matter now. The wind was picking up and the gulls appeared cold as they swam or else hunchbacked stood by the water's edge. He came near the *Sloop Inn.* No sign of life. He turned up Fish Street, passed the open car park, narrowly avoided a large taxi that came down the hill filled with baggage and people going to catch the morning train. He walked on almost mechanically. His movements were instinctive. It wasn't far now. He liked the small houses up Island Road. He had always liked these small houses on this straight street with its low stone and their two doors like horse-stables. Two fishermen went by with a wicker basket of lobster bait. Red gurnard looking like skinned rabbits. Pinky colour with white eyes. And as they went by, one of them picked up a red gurnard and pretended he was going to hit the old man. The old man instinctively huddled his head. And the others laughed and replaced the lobster bait. And why shouldn't he paint? Why did they laugh at his boats and harbour? The Devil will get them all in the end. Them and the village.

The wind was cold and the boys had hurt him. But now he could see the stone high-gabled Tower where Stig lived. Soon the Saturday walk would be over. Soon he would knock on the door and hear Stig's friendly voice.

« Come on in Alfred, I am just making some coffee. »

And then Alfred would climb up the steep stairs, to the top, and enter that familiar room with the paintings on the wall and the stove, bed, table and chairs. And Stig would jump to meet him and pull him up the last step and take

the pail away from him and ask him, half-laughing and half-worried, if he had any trouble. And Alfred would try to minimize the hurt and pretend it was nothing.

« Only them boys again. »

« Did they hurt you Alfred? »

And Stig would look for any visible hurt on his face and sometimes he would be able to detect something missing, like this morning's cap. And Alfred would vary his reply, often he could not hide the pain, especially when his face was cut, and his mouth bleeding.

And then Stig would curse.

« Damn this place, Alfred. This whole place stinks! They don't trust anyone who is different. »

And the old man would answer apologetically.

« But it's not their fault, it's the Devil in them, and they don't understand, like sometimes I don't understand why I want to paint, an old man like me. »

And Stig would remember the small bundle of paints and the old cardboard boxes that he had wrapped up the night before, and he would put them into the pail. And then he would give Alfred a hot cup of coffee. And after the coffee, he would ask Alfred what troubles he was having. And Alfred would reply awkwardly. « Them boats are all right. But when I want to paint one sailing around the head of the quay into the harbour, I have to paint them standing on end. They don't look like them boats by those real painters, but can't do it no other way. »

And Stig would tell him to keep on, if that was the way he saw the boats. And Alfred would tell him what he had painted during the week and sometimes he would tell him that he could not sleep at night, that the Devil came down the chimney and through the fireplace and kept hitting him on the head and told him that he was coming to get him. And the only way he could make him go back up the chimney was by shouting loud until he heard nothing. Then Stig would remain silent and the old man would think that even Stig had forsaken him. But Stig would come over and put his

arm around him and tell him not to worry about the voices, for he also had them. His did not come down the chimney, nor would they hit him on the head. But often he would sit alone, looking outside at the sea from the window of the Tower, and think of nothing for hours and hours. And his voices would make him depressed and not want to work. And he often thought and wondered what had people like himself and the old man done, that they should be punished by living all alone. And he would tell Alfred that the only way he could stop his voices was to run down to the Cove and plunge into the water, then go to *St. Peter's Finger* and talk to some of the people and drink and laugh with them. And when morning came, he would be able to work. But the old man listening to what Stig had just said, seemed not to understand. So that Stig would burst out laughing and point to a gull trying to pick at an old fish down below the window. And then Stig would take the pail. And the old man's face would brighten as they walked together across the harbour front so that everybody could see. And no one would dare to throw stones, not now. And the cuts and the bruises were quite easily forgotten when Stig walked back with him, talking to him, remarking about people that they were passing, saying Hello to someone he knew, smiling or waving to someone else further away. And the old man felt that no matter what danger and physical pain he had to go through to get to the Tower, it was worth it, just to be able to walk by these people with Stig beside him.

The path to the Tower was rough with stones. He could see the washing on the slopes of the Island and the nets laid out for the sun to dry. The Island looked very green. An old fishing boat lay rotting on the ground. The bottom was ripped open and grass grew through the wood. He could hear the surf breaking in the small cove near the Tower. A few pieces of stone lay by the side of the wall. A large crane and pulley rested on the ground. He walked up to the door, tired from

his walk, and knocked. He knew that soon he would hear the familiar sound of Stig coming down. But the only sound he heard was of the sea and a few gulls. He waited and knocked again. This time twice. Still nothing happened. He did not understand. He looked up to make sure it was the Tower. He saw the wrought iron mask of a grotesque grinning face with large empty eyes and a twisted mouth nailed above the door. He saw the raised iron letters STIG just underneath the mask. But no sound or movement. He did not know what was wrong. Stig had always been there waiting for him. He knocked again. He stepped back and went around the Tower, looked up at the small window always open to let the air in. But it was shut. The chimney that always had smoke coming out, was now sticking up, looking large and empty. He returned to the door. He could not understand why Stig was not there. This was Saturday morning. He had never forgotten before. He looked at his empty pail, trying to think where Stig would be. But he could not understand. He had never before had to wonder whether Stig would be there. waiting for him, when he arrived. He did not mind not having the cardboard or the paints. But what if Stig should not be there next Saturday morning? In front of the door, he stood with his face down, holding the empty pail, and the wind made a noise as it went around the Tower.

Instinctively, he pushed on the door. It gave a little. He put the pail down and pushed with both hands. He could hear the sound of wood as it scraped concrete. The door opened wide enough for him to see that it was wedged in position by an old log which he had just pushed back. He squeezed through the opening. Inside everything was silent. He called out *Stig*. But no answer came from either the workshop or the bedroom upstairs. He climbed up the stairs and he saw the empty room, tidy, with the low bed not slept in. The garbage pail had not been emptied and it stood beside the stove. The stove was not going, the ashes were cold. He went down the stairs, bewildered and not understanding, looking hopelessly around the room for the familiar face. But all

he saw were various figures, cold and frozen in their positions. A figure of a mother and a child, a horse's head over the workbench, a small stone frog on a chair. He bumped into a large piece of alabaster of a man praying. And he felt uncomfortable in this room with all these pieces of stone. He could see some letters lying inside the door. He saw the bundle of paints and cardboard beside the first step. But he did not want them now. He was confused. He could only think of Stig not being there, not waiting for him; and of that walk back, alone, through the village. He had never imagined that he would have to walk back alone through the village now awake and moving with people. And he wondered why Stig had let him down. He became like a dull instrument. He ceased to feel the cuts and the bruises or the humiliation by the boys. His body felt the cold when he stepped outside, but he was as a man exhausted from a long walk, and the cold somehow did not hurt as much, nor did the beating, nor the laughter of the fishermen. He only felt that Stig had hurt him in a way the others could never have done.

And as he began to walk away from the Tower, the full horror of the return walk through the village, came to him. He became frightened. But not like before. Then he knew what to expect, that somewhere the boys would be waiting for him. But there was always the satisfaction of that majestic walk back with Stig to more than replace any pain or hurt he might have suffered. He passed that same old hull of the boat with its bottom ripped open and the grass growing through the wood. Ayr Lane seemed far away. The old man, confused and disappointed, and hurt in a way he had not been hurt before, shuffled along with the empty pail. There was nowhere he could go except back to his cottage.

A. H. HEYS

THE STORY OF HIS LOVE

SHE

I wish I knew what he's writing. As usual he smiles and shrugs but this time it's worse. He turns to me often but his eyes look through me. What does he see?

HE

Let the present be nothing so I may know the past. A dark tunnel curves about me but beyond is the past, clear as a sunlit landscape, and moving through it her, my love. Let me know in silence all that she is.

SHE

He made love to me. Resentful at first, I came alive in his arms. But in the morning he was writing, twisting his forelock, staring. I cannot reach him. I feel strange.

HE

Out of the past, understanding, out of silence, her loveliness, out of present love, this ecstasy.

SHE

He made love, then was still, scarce breathing. I slipped out of bed and looked at the soft dark and the stars. I felt his hand upon my shoulder and he took me gently back and lay beside me. I slept. When I awoke he was not there. I went downstairs and found him writing.

HE

When I press her body in my arms my soul goes soaring up among the stars, yet also she disturbs and irritates, pulling my soul back to the petty earth.

SHE

He did not answer my smile: his eyes were dead. And later, in revenge, I would not let him love me. Though I wanted him, I would not.

HE

Let me not forget temptation, thwarting, self-disgust. She is all things.

SHE

I resent his secrecy. I must know what he's writing, I must! He bends over his notebook, scowling, his pen scratching. I loathe his brooding silence, his twisting hand, his eyes.

HE

My search is ending, all becoming clear. Now let me concentrate on exact words, on final cadences.

SHE

I cannot stand it. It will drive me mad.

HE

At last it is done, the story of my love. Now can I give it her and smile.

SHE

I am going.

HE

My love, my sweetest love, where are you?

CHRISTOPHER LEVENSON

WHEN WE LAY DOWN

When we lay down
In the tall reeds by the river
Leaves in the quivering daylight
Played over the water like a flute
And lilted us to sleep.

But now overnight
Your voice is gone;
Floes of green light,
Translucent to the sun,
Glide through the woods
Our livelier youth had known
And brush dead flowers aside.
Summer has run to seed,
Only the palest glow
Glazes the dove-grey pond
Or spreads its colour-wash
Through glades where the mountain-ash
Lies latched with licentious weed.
Daylight is overgrown.
Here, as our bodies hide
In a shade where the snails scrawl

Their signatures on bald rock
And spiders fasten their seal,
Here we must decide
Between dull evergreen
And the burning yellow leaf;
Half a year ago
A group of statues were planted
With a deliberate grace
In the Memorial Garden
Now where they stand, unwanted,
We watch as last summer's hay
That grew over their pedestals,
Is scythed by the keen ice,
And snow thatches the walls,
The fountain is petrified
And all their pride of place
In the poplar avenues
Cannot restore life
Once the veins harden.
Our drumming hearts drain cold
As we wish the old year done.

But we must choose
Whether our love shall build
A monument in stone
To give a lasting text
To ivy and cypress grove
Or whether in swift going
We take the chance and the night,
Rather change than decay
Where we must travel alone
Through strange lands in flight.

At sunlight after dew falls
Slowly, steadily

Through the fresh earth, creating
Shoots from the unseen grain,
You sought for and found my root
And wise to country ways
Raised me to health again.
By the side of flooding rills
Love to relieve my pain
Took yellow and white
Of lilies and daffodils
For clove and wintergreen
And strew them where we had lain
In silence all winter long,
Like the robes of a dead king.
While your eyes delightfully
Showered snowdrop tears
In necklaces, to effect
The miraculous cure.
Now as the glancing light
Fallows your gentle brows
And woodsmoke in brown curls
Knotted into a crown,
Breaks into a halo of fire,
To ride, like a white horse's, upon
The wild seas of your hair;
Even if my eyes close
Each of my fingers could tell
What feeling you are near;
When you smile my whole body knows
As a blind man figures braille.

At sunset, the slow light fading,
We lay on the ground like snow
Hiding the past, burying
All track of our wandering here
Your hair fell like thistledown
Over my limbs, together

We covered the broken ground,
The mere two of us healing
Division between two summers.
In this lake we must reconcile
The living with the drowned,
As mist in the water-meadows
Merges shadowy islands
In the vague shores of sound.

As, slack as water, we lay sleeping,
The violent river flew
Over our heads in dream
And flocks of fishes wove
Like needles through the slenderly
Waving nets of foliage, drawn
To the pull of the silver-scaled moon,
But our loving hearts broke free;
When we awoke to wonder
Our new eyes gazing at the green hills
Met in reviving joy, beyond a
Doubt, and our bodies floated
Out of their holy silence.
After the clear dawn
Darkness, like smoke, withdrew,
Into the mountains, every hope
Was alive with delirious water.
Fleet as the fallow deer,
The sun through a fanlight of leaf
Turned like a water wheel
To flail the grass, so took
The day by stealth, but we only
Noticed his subtle felony
And all the choir birds gathered and we heard
From valley and law and wood
The cuckoo recalling us
To our numbed senses, as the sun reminds

Our ghosts of their mortal shadows.
So spray of fern and river spray are made one
And in their unison we are borne away
To where the candor of the sea's breath
Flies down the April air
With one leaf answering
Our storm of fearful question,
That with glad hearts we bear
Precarious Spring, bringing impermanence.

NOEL WOODIN

A COUNTRY SEQUENCE

(for Valentine and Bonamy Dobree)

SUDELEY MILL

Now winter enters farms with a cold device
And stricken hedges stand like frozen wire,
The creeping world is followed by its trace
And orchards have an attitude of fire.

And now the glassy stanchions span my gate
With icy structures of a fragile kind.
I see how winter's fingers grip the root
And freeze the kindly gestures in the wind.

Again I leave my house for I am more
Of him who's tracked through all his private ways
By the violet's thriving and the open door.
Because I believe in what the clover says
And the primrose promise my young eyes saw
That morning I went out to earn your praise.

RIPPLE

If any-one asks tell them how this month
Has foxgloved agents humming with their load
And wheat in Pendock field is rich and good.
Tell them Chaceley meadow waves its wealth.

And if they disbelieve you, mention here
At Ripple there is comfrey by the road
And Tewkesbury has low water at the weir.
Let them see in grass a waving crowd.

I hear a blackbird naming God. I see
The simplest wind at work within an elm.
My eyes have made a great discovery.
So tell these things that rise to overwhelm
The lyric golden in the brain. Every
Evening brings a human stranger home.

CORSE LAWN

Here where the lark is master I am strong
And take illusion's gift unconsciously.
I know the hearsay in the hedge is wrong
For trades of cunning slowly name their prey.

Nor is the friendly wind indignant when
The padding foxpath glints its morning eye.
Now from its shallow feathers wakes the wren
And flies the fatal pathways of the sky.

Some slight breeze takes wing to fall and die
Weaving its bluest web upon my hand,

When music strikes my ear from bryony
And the orchis fills my eye's long land.

I speak and echo knows my origin.
Upon some other journey goes the sun.

NEWENT

In several winter rumours I was told
The habits of the salmon under moons
And learned a trick or two that in the towns
Would never be believed. It was my trade.
And in my tutored eye I knew about
The tracks beyond a hedge. I had a flair
For finding where the badger builds a sett
And knew the bravery a wren must wear.

Huntsmen still come to me for foxes, for I
Can tell the earths by guesswork from a bark
Though I've no time for hunting and I tell them why.
At any pub in Gloucester I'm known by name —
I give them hints about their market work
For there's few to-day to beat me at this game.

CHACELEY

That hawk, the prince there of the frightened sky
Puts me now in mind of Rhys, a keen
Fine featured man from Ross, with one glass eye
And anger. I spoke with him in Twyning lane
About reality I suppose it was.
We named a man's endeavour and his scope

And thoroughly disagreed as to what this is.
He said I was as stubborn as the Pope.

The linnet, queen of the Secret grass I'd hear
Rising into a massacre. I'd put
This and metaphysics on an idea
That critics said was good. They may be right
Though, as I told Rhys, it is enough
To deal in human speeches, fears and love.

REDMARLEY

On peopled places, on smoke and wedded rooms
In quietened wireless roads of evening's town
The parliaments of night disperse and homes
Are wrapped and put away. The sun falls down.

One oak stands up above the crimson point.
The country noises marshal at the gate.
One eye sees many ventures brought to nought
As many secret hunters find their meat.

Redmarley was this whereabouts and clay
Was heavy on the foot. And I was worth
As much as boasting farmers on their day,
As any laden poacher in his stealth.

But as I went I took a private way.
I saw the coated armies of the north.

GUITING POWER

What havoc shall the sharp hawk's hovering
Discriminate? Held in his metal eye

Destruction takes the summer of the wren
And makes a swooping hillside which is sky.

It is October now. The old wind swings
Bright over stubble and the rook's reply
Is spokesman of the plough. The wary wings
Are feathered in their carnage suddenly.

The private whereabouts, where we all are
is always here, in harm's way as the earth
Is tricked to birth by grass blades and their scar.
And still the unticked minute's rich with death.

But many things are good for you and me
Hidden in the soft uprisings of a breath.

THE PLOUGH INN

I came by way of Pendock and Long Green Cross
And the cider fires were blazing down my sight,
Drunken as a blackberry as I was
I heard a fox bark snap the deeps of night.

Who saw me saw one amazed with skies
As dewy globes held in a spider's line
Stood on my path. I broke them with my eyes.
My feet struck rock and tumbled in the lane.

Who saw me saw no-one that I knew
Saw only a boasting hero of a thirst
And several graver things I didn't do,
Though I was some soldier, one of the best
Who laughed at the midnight cosies, laughed all through
The roaring roads. I went as one much blessed.

THE MYTHE

Suppose the wind was raw about the weirs
Where the morning heron waits alone,
The men of winter walk in private fears
And one called silence strikes them to the bone.

Suppose through tear's window there lay the brief
Largo of summer that the bee had hummed,
The lark's lilt had gone and grey as grief
This place was where once the lilac stemmed.

Suppose then, the whited grass in a sudden frost
Stood on Mytton Ridge and from his wires
The tawny swooped away. Suppose the east
Opened narrow doors and shone its fires.

Suppose though, a simple welcome greets us most;
The kitchen doors are open and say yes.

FYL RAHMES

FUZZY-WUZZY

Popsy Khan, the terror of the jungle (a coltish, adolescent cat) stalked through the lavender bed towards the lupins. Imaginary field-mice scattered in fright. She peeped stealthily through the tall undergrowth, and saw the small boy, her natural enemy, coming towards her. She fled. The shrill familiar yell: « Hey, Popsy! » followed her bounding flight across the lawn, and the ground shook with pursuing footsteps.

The small boy, who was called Lion because of his tawny mane of hair, came trotting across the lawn, lifting his knees high, waist-deep in the shimmer of heat above the garden. In one hand he carried Fuzzy-Wuzzy, in the other a jamjar full of sticklebacks, which slopped water as he ran, leaving a trail of tiny fish to die in the grass.

But his pursuit of the cat was momentary; he had important things to attend to. For a week now he had been building a house among the lupins. He had finished it today and was moving in, taking his treasures to it from the nursery. It was a very special, secret house. No one else would be allowed there except Fuzzy-Wuzzy. At first, Lion had decided that even Fuzzy-Wuzzy would only be invited on rare occasions, but as usual he hadn't been firm enough and had allowed

Fuzzy-Wuzzy to come and watch the building. Gradually Fuzzy-Wuzzy had become more and more privileged. He had been told all the secrets about the house, until he seemed to know more secrets than Lion himself. In fact, by the time it was finished, Lion had begun to feel that it was Fuzzy-Wuzzy's house, that he had been building it for Fuzzy-Wuzzy all along, and that he, Lion, would be little better than an outsider. It was always like that with Fuzzy-Wuzzy. He was always privileged, always the centre of attention. When there were strawberries for tea, Fuzzy-Wuzzy always had the biggest, though he never deigned eat it. « All you think about is self, self, SELF! » Lion would scold him, and Fuzzy-Wuzzy, small, elegant, and dignified, would calmly raise an eyebrow, as if to say, « That's of no consequence to me, I assure you. » He was a dandy with a careless charm. He ruled the nursery, and ruled Lion's life. Lion could not go out or sit down to a meal without him, or fall asleep at night without Fuzzy-Wuzzy on his pillow.

The house among the lupins was a slender Gothic cathedral, where the sun streamed through stained glass windows of blue, yellow and orange. It was cool and fragrant, dim after the blaze of the afternoon sun on the lawn. Lion's mother had given him some marigold seeds. He squatted on the floor of his house and planted them laboriously, spelling his own name. When he had finished he lay down, hot and tired, and stared along the dim green and purple colonades of the flowerbed. He could see spiders and ants hurrying on the dry earth; last autumn's leaves were still there, brown and curly, or pale and skeletal; and dry worm casts which crumbled when he touched them.

The heat lay heavily on the garden like a huge cat, purring in its sleep. The herbaceous borders were busy with butterflies and bees. From over the fence came the smooth intermittent murmur of a lawnmower. It seemed impossible that over in Europe there were men in trenches, Lion's own father among them, inflicting or suffering a violent, meaningless death; or that the tiny aeroplane crawling across

the sky like a minute spider of sound — the sky its tight-stretched web — might contain a bomb. It must be a dream. Reality was the garden, the memory of morning, the inevitability of evening; the two women lying in striped deckchairs on the lawn, their hands lifted to fend off the sun, their faces goggled with dark glasses, like submarine creatures, wobbling in the heat haze above the garden; and their voices drifting lazily on the air: « A direct hit... more black curtains... Poor Mrs Wilkins, both her sons... The lilies are a dream this year... »

Imperceptibly the world revolved. The garden tilted away from the sun. The light, maturing on the lawn, was striped with the long shadows of crab-apple trees. The two deckchairs were empty. From the open kitchen window came the clatter of plates and cups. Lion stood alone on the lawn, caught suspended between two desires; the security of supper (the cool kitchen and the smell of cold milk) — and resentment at bedtime after supper, in daylight, the day over too soon, which urged him to escape. He waited, standing very still, for one bewitchment to take hold of him, for one desire to prove the stronger.

The air felt strange. The lawn seemed to stretch away endlessly on either side of him. He looked about him, his senses awakening in the coolness, his eyes widening. For a fleeting moment he was almost aware of the world — aware that beyond the fence and the crab-apple trees lay endless terraces of gardens, like one vast allotment, each garden a separate life, an enclosed world, where men, women, children and animals all drew, on their own small paths, towards the end of the same day. And this day, stretching over the world like a pale skylight, seemed to palpitate on the brink of unveiling some rare and fragile secret to him... and then was still again, as the light changed, the enigma misting it over again like a filmy curtain.

He fetched Fuzzy-Wuzzy from the lupin house, and went down the lawn to the bottom of the garden. He walked a

little unsteadily, feeling suddenly taller, and feeling lighter, as if he was walking just above the grass. It was like dreaming. He passed the rockery, where a stone boy sat and gazed at the growth of golden lichen freckles on his stomach. Below him, a paper boat floated, capsized and sodden, in the small dark pool. He had only put the boat there yesterday, but somehow that seemed to be a long long time ago.

At the bottom of the garden was a wood. There was no fence or wall; the garden ended suddenly with a fringe of of trees. The wood covered a steep downward slope. This was Lion's retreat almost every evening at supper time, until his mother should come to find him or darkness and hunger send him in to the house of his own accord. As he reached the wood he clutched Fuzzy-Wuzzy closer to him instinctively. The older children of the neighbourhood told ghostly tales about the wood, that it was haunted, that there were goblins and wild animals there. But this was not what Lion feared. He loved the wood, the deep shadows, the birdsong, the sudden silences, the startled rabbits which leapt up from under his feet and ran away. His fear was of something else. His mother had a gramophone record called « The Teddy Bears' Picnic. » This record caused Lion constant anxiety. He dared not loosen his hold on Fuzzy-Wuzzy in case he went away to a Picnic and never came back. Lion was sure, with a fatalistic sureness, that one day Fuzzy-Wuzzy would go away for ever. Sometimes he felt that Fuzzy-Wuzzy was only waiting for a chance to escape. Thus taking him down to the wood was a tremendous risk; the song had made it clear that the Picnic would take place there. Even this evening, when Lion felt bigger and stronger than ever before, he was a little worried. « No Picnics, do you hear? » he said to Fuzzy-Wuzzy, and Fuzzy-Wuzzy stared at him.

Lion went down into the wood. The red sun burned in the topmost branches of the trees, surrounding the boy with a bright bronze light. Hundreds of birds seemed to be singing, thrushes and blackbirds, and a nightingale, a pigeon purring huskily, a big slate-coloured bird beating up through the

leaves in fright, a damp clamour like the touch of a moth, the slatting and snapping of its wide wings fading away through the trees like idiot laughter. Then the wood seemed very quiet. All the paths and clearings between the trees were filled with dancing gnats, gilded by the sunlight. Lion went further down the wood than usual because the air-raid warning had begun to wail, and he knew his mother would come to look for him. As soon as the siren had died down he heard the drone of German planes. He knew they were German because they had a different sound from English planes — an angry rhythmic snarl, like a bluebottle on a windowpane.

He found a clearing which was so beautiful he sat down at once to look round it more closely. There were two fairy rings, dark rich circles of grass. He lay down on his back in one of them, placing Fuzzy-Wuzzy carefully beside him. There was a dogfight going on directly overhead. He watched, fascinated. He had never seen one from so close before. Wait till he told the boys at school about this! A big German bomber was being attacked by a crowd of little English fighters. They were buzzing round it like flies tormenting a bull. Then one of the bomber's wings seemed to drift slowly away from it, and the big plane began to dive, twisting round and round, a trail of thick black smoke pouring from it. Suddenly, to Lion's delight, the sky was filled with parachutes like white anemones, drifting down towards him.

Kurt was calm. The captain of the bomber, he found himself mentally ticking off each member of the crew, as if for a report — (but what use will that be in an English prison camp? he thought.) The last out of the plane — except for Erich who had been killed when they were hit — he could see the rest of the crew in the sky below him. Two of them had landed in the fields below now. That would be Paul and Karl, who had gone first. Why was one of them lying still? — killed in the air by a stray bullet, perhaps. Others were landing in the fields now, tiny black figures with huge white trailing

wings, like flying ants. More ants, without wings, were running out from the edges of the fields to take them prisoner. There were only two of them left in the air now. Hans, the rear gunner, whose stomach had been pierced by a fragment of the falling plane, had not stopped screaming yet. He had screamed all the way down the sky. Kurt could not hear the words, but could imagine what they would be. Don't let me die falling alone through space. Let me die on the comforting earth which I understand and on which I was born. Why must I suffer? Why must I die? What has this war got to do with me?

Kurt was angry. Why couldn't it have been him? (This was not due to heroism but to a complex nature). Hans was a simple hardworking peasant who loved life, loved the earth he worked, loved his wife and children and his little farm. Why couldn't it have been him, Kurt? — by such as whom the war had been started, and for such as whom war meant what little it could ever mean, since he was emotionally detached from life, since life to him meant nothing but a slow death and imprisonment, mitigated only now and then by a sickly, aethereal fever which only the utterly lost would call hope or happiness. With relief he heard the long scream trail slowly away. There was silence now, but for the rushing of the wind. Hans' little life had gone out like a light; his pain now transposed into the slower, numb pain of a peasant woman in Austria.

Now he was alone in the air. The wind carried him almost horizontally across the fields, towards a small wood. He judged that he would land in it. His eyes narrowed; that would be tricky. Suddenly he seemed to be falling very fast. His feet hit the topmost branches of the trees. He went cold with fear — in spite of his mental passivity towards death — and he was a wide-eyed child again, afraid of the dark, afraid of falling, afraid of pain. The bigger branches tore at his clothes, and he shielded his face as best he could. His parachute caught with a jerk that knocked the breath out of him, and mira-

culously, he found himself hanging in a clear space between the trees. He cut himself free with his knife, and dropped a few feet to the ground. He was completely unhurt.

Shaken badly, his knees weak and his heart thumping, he leaned back against a tree and groped for a cigarette. He drew on it hard, and looked around him slowly at the rosy light and the dancing gnats. Something moved behind him and he jumped, startled, spinning round. He saw a small boy with thick fair hair lying in a dark circle of grass, gazing at him. Kurt's first instinct was to run, but he saw that the child was alone, and that he was smiling at him in an engaging way; he relaxed again. In any case, it was only a matter of time before he was captured; it would be useless to try to escape.

« Can I have it? » said the boy.

« Have what? » Kurt had learnt English at school.

The boy pointed up at the trees. « Your parachute. Can I have it? »

« I suppose so. »

« Yippee! » The boy jumped excitedly to his feet. He frowned up professionally at the parachute. « It's all tangled up in the trees. I'll have to climb up and get it. »

He started towards the trees, but then came back again.

« You sit in the fairy ring and keep an eye on Fuzzy-Wuzzy, » he ordered.

« Fuzzy-Wuzzy? »

« Yes. My bear. There's going to be a Picnic, and I don't want him to go. »

« A picnic? With your parents? » Kurt looked about him quickly.

« *No.* A Teddy Bears' Picnic. » The child was impatient at his ignorance.

Kurt couldn't understand, and gave it up. But to be obliging, he strolled over to the the dark circle of grass and sat down beside the small woolly bear. The small boy, half way up one of the trees, watched him anxiously. « I think you'd better hold him, » he said. « He might easily escape

without you noticing, otherwise. He's a most extraordinary bear. »

« Alright, » said Kurt, amused. He picked up the bear and held it in both hands. It had a rather strange, ironic face. The boy disappeared into the thick foliage overhead. Kurt watched the leaves shaking and swaying as the boy struggled with the parachute. After a moment he saw the small anxious face peeping down at him. « You *are* holding him *tight*, aren't you? »

Kurt nodded, and held up the bear to show the child.

« Well, don't let go of him for a *minute*! »

Kurt smiled. « Why do you call him that — Fuzzy-Wuzzy? » he asked conversationally.

« Oh — don't you know that poem?

Fuzzy-Wuzzy was a bear,
Fuzzy-Wuzzy had no hair,
So Fuzzy-Wuzzy wasn't fuzzy,
Wuz 'e?

The boy had rattled off the verse so quickly that Kurt didn't catch more than two words of it, but he smiled politely. The small boy disappeared into the trees again.

Kurt found himself both amused at the situation he was in, standing guard over an elusive teddy bear — and amazed at his own calm. What was it he felt? A pleasure at simply being alive? At having the sun on his back and a cigarette in his mouth — no more. That was something new — or rather, something so old he had forgotten about it.

Yet he had been happy as a child — suddenly he remembered that clearly. At school, and then in his first year at college in Berlin, he had been bright, ambitious, eager for life. And then, suddenly, his ideals had peeled off the world like pretty wallpaper. All the brightness he had clung to and warmed to had flickered out feebly like birthday candles in a draughty room. Somehow, one day, he had started asking himself unanswerable questions. 'Suppose I *do* become the greatest lawyer in Germany? — what use will that be?' 'What is real — since myself, time, and the world I live in are

unreal?' And instead of leaving these questions unanswered and turning to something else, he had clung to them like a monomaniac, holding up the granite wall to his face like a mirror and beating his brief life against it, threatening (but threatening who?) that if these questions were not answered he would inflict a terrible punishment upon himself, and on all he touched.

How diseased he had become! Every facet of his life had been tainted. Once he had owned a dog, and the dog had been run over by a car. He had loved the dog. But when he saw it dead in the gutter all he felt was anger at it, and envy, as if, though his inferior, it had outstripped him in the great race; because fate had prefered the dog, including it in the mystery of death — which, while it might not be an answer to his questions, was at least an end to the futility and the meaningless ridicule of asking them.

But, he now thought, looking round him at the sunlit trees, If death is an end, isn't life an end too? — because to ask these questions again and again and again is perhaps neither living nor dying but a limbo between the two, a twilight existence. Perhaps living is being as Hans was, not asking the questions but being a part of them — and thus a part of the answers — just as the dog, being dead, was a part of them too.

Formerly he had seen even his childhood tainted, saying to himself: "I wasn't happy then, I was just unaware." But now a belief in his childhood began to grow in him. It's almost sure, he thought, That if I asked this boy those terrible questions, and if he were articulate enough to answer them, his replies would be entirely valid. And even if, supposing I asked him, "Why are you and I alive?" he were simply to stare at me in surprise and say, "I don't know" — that would be the truest answer of all, because meanwhile he is going on living and he is happy.

Struck by the faint intangible logic of these ideas — which somehow seemed proven just by the trees around him and the gnats in the tired light — Kurt found himself wondering

for the first time in his life how he had ever caught this disease, this worm in the heart. Could it have been no more than the poisoned atmosphere of Berlin in the thirties? But yet — surely any thinking person was bound to ask those questions. They *were* valid, after all — the abyss over which we build our rainbows — He stopped dead in his train of thought. What a fine knife-edge there was between hope and despair! He might seem to hold a seahorse in his hand — but if he squeezed too hard, he would find nothing left but a piece of dirty seaweed. How carefully he would have to tread...

The boy was calling him. « Hey! »

Kurt looked up. « Yes? »

« Have you got a knife? »

« Yes. »

The boy came scrambling down through the branches, his face flushed, a graze on one knee. Kurt handed him a knife like a stiletto, which sprang open when he pressed a catch. The boy gave a low whistle, and took the knife with reverence. « Be careful, it's very sharp, » said Kurt. The boy climbed up in the tree again and disappeared.

There was silence for a while, except for the tugging and sawing Kurt could hear up in the trees. He turned the small teddy bear over in his hands and stared at it musingly. It certainly had a surprising face. He tried idly to find a word for it — not inscrutable, exactly — or mysterious... something more than that. He could understand the boy's love for it; those deep bright eyes, the faint raising of one eyebrow. Though a mass-produced toy, it seemed as though some freak in its manufacture had given it the ironic secrecy of an Indian buddha.

« You're a German soldier, aren't you? »

« Yes. » Kurt wondered how the boy would react.

There was a rustling in the leaves, and Kurt saw the child's face peeping down at him, for all the world like a faun. Kurt suddenly felt that perhaps the boy was only playing at being a child, and was fully aware of himself and the world — but

knew that to adults this is inacceptible, and that the pretence of innocence must be kept up for their sake — but — Kurt stopped himself — wasn't this a symptom of the disease again?

« Have you ever killed anyone? »

« I expect so. »

« Did you drop any bombs today? »

« Yes. »

« I saw your plane crash. It went whoooom...! » He imitated the spiralling dive of the bomber with his hand, almost losing his balance. « Have you ever been wounded? »

« No. »

The child seemed disappointed. « A man I know has got a terrific scar from the last war. On his tummy. I saw it at the swimming pool. »

There was a pause. Kurt thought of Hans screaming all the way down the sky.

« You don't look like a German. My mother says the Germans are all butchers. »

Kurt laughed.

The boy looked at Kurt confidentially, and lowered his voice. « Aren't you going to escape? »

« Perhaps, » said Kurt, falling into the romantic role. « But if they caught me, I'd be killed. »

« I'm escaping too, » the boy whispered. « From my mother. It's after my bedtime. »

Kurt stretched out in the warm grass and laughed, softly, with the whole of his relaxed body. The boy, watching him from the tree, began to grin sheepishly. « Why are you laughing? » he said. « No particular reason, » said Kurt, flexing his muscles luxuriously, and going on laughing. He felt as if he were laughing all the poison of the last ten years out of him, and a deep emotional satisfaction was growing in its place. The boy, watching him, began to laugh too, delightedly. « Isn't it funny? » he shouted. Kurt found that for the first time in his life he was able to laugh at himself, as he had been in the past — the past now seeming like a circus and he the

clown, the very dignified clown whose trousers keep falling down; to reveal, not as in a real-life circus his striped combinations, but the marks of putrefaction. Now laughter seemed to clothe him with a new resilient flesh (one that would not turn gangrenous) that was as living and as eternal as the cool evening air he breathed. The boy in the trees was waving his arms up and down, laughing and shouting: « I feel like a baby bird! » Kurt stopped laughing and lay in silence, his arm across his face, listening to the memory of his own laughter, cautiously, dreading to discover that it had been hysteria. But coming not from his mind and his taut nerves, but from his whole body, it could only be real. Reassured; he drew his arm away from his face and stared up into the trees, smiling. He hardly thought any more now; his head had gone on holiday.

The boy freed the parachute and it dropped slowly to the grass, drifting, billowing, settling and sinking softly like a fairytale fog. The boy came scrambling down after it. Kurt raised himself on one elbow and looked at him. They smiled at each other.

« It was funny, wasn't it? » said the boy.

« What was? »

He looked blank. « I don't know, » he said, and smiled again.

Kurt watched him kneeling in the grass, gathering the parachute into his small arms, delighted with the feel of the delicate white silk. It was like a dead swan, the wings of Icarus; he adored it. He crooned to it, stroking it with his hand, rubbing it against his warm freckled cheek. Kurt felt dreamy. Idly he picked up Fuzzy-Wuzzy and looked again into the strange secretive face. What a light enchantment hung about him... even the little teddy bear seemed part of it, suffused with it...

He stood up, and moved slowly about the clearing.

He felt the air, cool and fragrant, on his skin. Why had he never been aware of it before? Or of the leaves... the green eyes of the world that watched him through their fine trans-

parent lids. How closely the trees were woven into the world...

He heard men crashing through the undergrowth towards him. A shout: « It was somewhere round here he fell! » The noises grew closer.

A prison camp... for how long? Two years? Five? The birds were like handfuls of earth thrown up into the sky... Could he survive that length of time? Would he ever feel so close to life again?

He could see the men now, coming through the trees, pointing rifles at him. He raised his arms above his head. He still felt calm. He said goodbye to the boy and went to meet them.

It was dark now, long after Lion's bedtime, and he was very sleepy. All the excitement, the dogfight, the thrill of having a parachute, and the endless questions — "What did he say to you?" "Why didn't you run away?" — had exhausted him. His mother had to carry him home.

He was tucked up in bed now, in his small blue room. Just as his mother turned to go, he said, « Mummy, I've left my bear behind. »

She held her breath, expecting a storm of tears.

But he was strangely quiet and dreamy. « Never mind, » he murmured, « I'll go and fetch him tomorrow morning, » and he fell asleep at once.

The next morning, very early, Lion slipped out of the house and ran down the garden in his pyjamas. The dew on the lawn was fresh and cold between his toes. The sky was pale, the air strange, as it had been the evening before. He felt as if he were in a new world. He went down to the wood and straight to the clearing. The two fairy rings were still there. So were the shreds of rope he had cut from the parachute, lying in the wet grass. But Fuzzy-Wuzzy had gone.

Lion looked round quickly, not missing any possible hilding place. No Fuzzy-Wuzzy. Lion could hardly believe it. So

he had really gone to the Picnic at last. He would never see Fuzzy-Wuzzy again.

He stood still, the corners of his mouth bending down pathetically, habitually, waiting for tears to come. But none came. In fact, he didn't really feel very sad. He blinked his eyes in surprise. He frowned. Yes, it was true, he didn't really feel sad at all. He turned slowly and began to walk up through the wood towards the house. After all, he had a parachute now. Life would be different.

DOM MORAES

KANHERI CAVES

Over these blunted, these tormented hills,
Hawks hail and wheel, glissading down the sky.
It seems this green ambiguous landscape tilts
And teeters the perspective of the eye.
Only two centuries after Christ, this cliff
Was colonised by a mild antique race
Who left us, like a faded photograph,
Their memories that dry up in this place.

They left no ghosts. The rock alone endures.
The drains and cisterns work; storm wrecked the stairs;
Blocks are fallen: sunlight cracks those floors,
And fidgets in a courtyard where a pair
Of giant Buddhas smile and wait their crash.
Then temples, audience-halls, a lonely tomb.
I touch its side. The stone's worn smooth as flesh.
A stranger dangles peaceful in that womb.

Worm he will be, if born: blink in the sun.
I'll crawl into his dark; perhaps he'll climb
Beyond the trippers to the final stone
Flat of the hillock, there to grow in Time.
Dry pubic ferns prickle the bitter sand.

Hawks in a hot concentric ecstasy
Of flight and shriek will wake his vision. And
When the clouds lift, he'll glimpse the miles-off sea.

SAILING TO ENGLAND

Fallen into a dream, I could not rise.
I am in love, and long to be unhappy.
Something within me raised her from the sea,
A delicate sad face, and stones for eyes.

Something within me mumbles words and grieves
For three swept out, while inland watchers groaned,
Humped, elbows jerking in a skein of waves
Like giant women knitting. One was drowned.

He could not swim and so he had to sink,
And only floated after he had died,
Clutching some weeds, and tolerant of the tide:
A happy traveller on a sea of ink.

I blot his eyes: waves rustle in the breeze.
Perhaps he's thinking. The moon will rise in blood
Trawling her whisper across the sprawling seas
To rouse him, if he thinks. But if he's dead?

He must forget his death, I'll tell him so.
« It's nearly time for lunch, » I'll tell him. « Change.
Be careful; grin a bit; avoid her eyes;
Later go settle in the upstairs lounge

And laugh as if you ground stones in your teeth,
Watching the sea; or simply sit alone;
Or choose the wise alternative to death,
A nap to while away the afternoon. »

THAT WAS

That was an innocent country:
Warlock and dwarf, the hairy forest, dragons
Somewhere there, they said:
Though never seen, some times heard,
Somewhere in the hills, the hermit's cavern
Where all was forgiven.

These dying would only be the trek to sleep
Or waking through tall mirrors of a dream;
In spite of which all were afraid to die.
The golden princess had no remedy
When the dragon arrived
But to surrender to his lechery.

Opened her eyes, but found herself awake
Or asleep perhaps in the same
Dream by the sleeping unsufferable lake
Where her grief as simple as dying
Pressed her body into the shape of a tear
Lying by embroidered leaves
To spill upon the blotting-pad of water.

That tyrant was limpid:
With his iron guard of poets and his liars
He bubbled through stonewalled halls of life
Sucking upon his tide
Like tiny-coloured pebbles, chilled desires.
At a river's end
Streams gulp and sweat, expiring in the sand.

FIGURES IN THE LANDSCAPE

« Dying is just the same as going to sleep, »
The piper whispered, « close your eyes. »
And blew some hints and whispers on his pipe:
The children closed their eyes

And gravely wandered in a private darkness,
Imagining death to be a way of looking.
The piper seemed to listen with his eyes.
A cry from distant meadows brought them waking

And shook some birds from folds of fields and walls.
Children are birds: they chirped and flew away
Into a country peace as tall as hills.
Even their voices went away

And left an absence, glitter of his loss.
He blew a wavery quittance on the pipe,
Then honked with thumb and finger at his nose
And shuffled off to find a place to sleep.

Waking in lonely fields at break of day
He remembered a dream, looked at the sky
And wondered would a stranger come that way
To take his hand and say, I long to die.

BEING MARRIED

When I awake (he said) I shall be lonely,
O feel my loneliest ever by your side;
For I have dropped my root, and stuck; you only

Move through a night of sleep, conscious of right.
Beloved conquering bride,
My kisses lanced your veins with veins of light.

O take my angel in your sleeping flesh.
I killed him from me, wrestling with your belly,
Wrenched to the contact and the bitter flash
Which you stir well, better than verse perhaps.
Lost angel, now how easily
The ritual nights will come, and roots collapse.

I lost in night must hear you breathe in whispers,
Your hater now for spendthrift of my breath:
Lost in the night we fought: we rushed together
At frontiers of our miles of loneliness
And lived, and parted at a gate
Where the last touch of lips was meant to bless.

ROBERT MUSIL

THE PERFECTING OF A LOVE

« You really can't come? »

« I'm afraid not. I must try to get this job finished now as fast as I can, you know. »

« Lilli would be so happy... »

« I know, dear. I know. But it simply can't be managed. »

« And I don't like the idea of travelling without you, not a bit... » His wife said it as she poured out tea; and she glanced across to where he sat, in the corner of the room, in the bright cretonne-covered armchair, smoking a cigarette. It was evening. Outside, looking out upon the street, the dark green shutters were part of a long row of dark green shutters and in no way distinct from the rest. Like a pair of dark eyelids, lowered in indifference, they concealed the glitter of this room, where from a pale silver tea-pot the tea now flowed, hitting the bottom of each cup with a faint tinkle and then standing still in mid-air, a translucent, twisted column of weightless topaz, brown as straw... In the slightly concave planes of the tea-pot there lay reflections green and grey, with here and there a gleam of blue or yellow, a pool of colours that had flowed together and now lay quite still. And the woman's arm stood away from it, and the gaze with which she looked across at her husband slanted off from the line of the arm, forming an angle with it, a rigid pattern in the air.

Yes, there was an angle: that was evident. But there was something else in it, something almost physical, that only these two people could feel, to whom this angle was as taut as a steel strut, holding them fast in their places and yet uniting them, making or them — for all the space between — an almost tangible unity. This invisible support rested on the solar plexus, and there they could feel the pressure of it; yet even while it made them sit stiffly upright in their chairs, with faces immobile and gaze unswerving, there, at the point where it conjoined with them, there was a tender stir of animation, a delicate lightness, as though their two hearts were fluttering together and merging like two swarms of tiny butterflies.

On this thin, scarcely real, and yet so perceptible sensation the whole room hung as on a lightly trembling axis, and this in its turn rested on the two people in the room: the objects all around held their breath, the light on the walls froze into golden lace... everything was a silence and a waiting and was there because of them. Time, which runs through the world like an endless tinsel thread, seemed to pass through the centre of this room and through the centre of these people and suddenly to pause and petrify, stiff and still and glittering... and the objects in the room drew a little closer together. It was that standstill, with the faint sinking that follows it, which happens when surfaces suddenly fall into place and a crystal forms: a crystal, forming here round these two people, the centre of it corresponding to their centre — two people gazing at each other through this holding of the breath and this ensphering, this converging upon them, of everything, and gazing at each other as though through thousands of mirroring planes, seeing each other as for the first time...

The woman put the tea-pot down and her hand dropped to the table. As though exhausted by the weight of their happiness, each sank back into the cushions; and while they were still holding each other fast with their eyes, they smiled, as though lost, both feeling the need to speak — and yet not about themselves. So they talked of a character in a book they

had been reading, a man who was psychologically abnormal. Both spoke of a certain passage, and a problem it raised, as if this were what they had just been thinking of; but in fact they were resuming a discussion that had strangely fascinated them for days past — a problem that under the camouflage of its superficial relation to the book actually bore on something else. And indeed after a while their thoughts imperceptibly returned, by way of this unconscious pretext, to a preoccupation with themselves.

« I wonder how a man like this G. sees himself, » the woman said. And, sunk in her reflections, she went on almost to herself: « He corrupts children, he seduces girls, dragging them down into self-defilement. And there he stands then, smiling and staring in fascination at the little scrap of eroticism that faintly flickers in him like summer lightning. Do you think he realises he's doing wrong? »

« It's hard to say. Perhaps he does — perhaps not, » the man answered. « Perhaps one simply can't raise that sort of question about such feelings. »

« What *I* think, » the woman said — and it was now apparent that she was really speaking not of a random character in a book but of something specific that was beginning to loom up, for her, behind the character — « what I think is that he believes his actions are good. »

For a while their thoughts ran on silently side by side, and then emerged in words that were again at a remove; and yet it still was as though they were holding hands in silence and as though everything had been said long ago. « ...He does his victims harm. He hurts them. He must *know* he's demoralising them, confusing their erotic urge, stirring it up so that it'll never again have a single aim, a point of rest. And yet it's as though one could see him smiling, too — his face quite soft and pale, quite melancholy and yet resolute, and full of tenderness — a smile that hovers tenderly over himself and his victim, as a rainy day hovers over the land — heaven sends it, there's no comprehending why — and in his mournfulness, in the feelings that accompany the destruction he wreaks, there lies

all the excuse he needs... Isn't every mind solitary, lonely? »

« Yes indeed, isn't every mind solitary? »

These two people, now silent again, were both thinking of that third person, that unknown, that one out of so many third persons, as if they were walking through a landscape together: trees, meadows, sky, and all at once the impossibility of knowing why here it is all blue and over there it is cloudy and overcast. They felt all these *third persons* surrounding them, enveloping them like that huge sphere which encloses us and sometimes turns an alien, glassy eye upon us, making us shiver, when the flight of a bird cuts an inexplicably wavering line across it. In this twilit room there was all at once a cold, vast solitude, bright as noon.

Then (and it was like the faintest note drawn from a violin, when the bow grazes the strings) one of them said: « He's like a house with locked doors. All he has done is within him, like soft music perhaps — but who can hear it? If one could hear it, it might turn everything into gentle melancholy. »

And the other replied: « Perhaps he has walked through himself again and again, with outstretched, groping hands, trying to find a door, and in the end he stands still, and all he can do is put his face close to the impenetrable window-panes, and see the beloved victims from a long way off, and smile... »

That was all they said, but in their blissfully communing silence there was a resonance that rose higher and higher. 'And there's only this smile, overtaking them and floating above them, and binding their last hideous, twitching gestures into a thin-stemmed posy as they bleed to death... And it lingers tenderly, wondering if they can feel what it has done, and lets the posy fall, and then the mystery of its solitude bears it upwards on vibrant wings, it soars resolutely — an alien beast entering into the marvel-crowded emptiness of space.'

It was on this solitude that they felt the mystery of their union rested. There was an obscure sense of the world around them, which made them cling to each other; there

was a dreamlike sense of chill on all sides except the one where they leaned against each other, disburdening themselves, uniting like two wonderfully well-fitting halves, which, being put together, undergo a diminution of their outer limits, while their inner area enlarges as they merge. They were sometimes unhappy because they could not share everything down to the very last and least thing.

« Do you remember, » the woman suddenly said, « a few nights ago —? Did you realise there was something between us then? Something had occurred to me at that moment, nothing of the slightest importance, but it was not *you*, and I was suddenly desperate that there could be anything other than you. And I couldn't tell you about it, and then I couldn't help smiling at the thought of how you didn't know and believed yourself very close to me, and later I stopped wanting to tell you and became angry with you for not feeling it yourself, and your caresses could no longer reach me. And I couldn't bring myself to ask you to let me be, for it wasn't anything *real*, I was really close to you, and all the same it was there like a vague shadow, it was as if I could be far from you and could exist without you. Do you know that feeling — how sometimes everything is suddenly there twice over, one sees all the things around one, complete and distinct as one has known them all along, and then once again, pale, twilit, and startled, as if they were already being regarded, secretly and with a stranger's gaze, by someone else? I wanted to take you and wrench you back into myself — and then again to push you away and fling myself on the ground because it had been possible at all... »

« Was that the time when —? »

« Yes, that was the time when, in your arms, I suddenly began to weep. You thought it was from excess of longing to enter deeper into your feelings with my own. Don't be angry with me — I simply had to tell you, I don't know why. It was all just fancy, but it hurt so much, and I think that was why I couldn't help thinking of G. You do understand —? »

The man in the armchair stubbed out his cigarette and

stood up. His gaze interlocked with hers, both swaying as with the tension there is in the bodies of two tightrope-walkers standing close together.

Then, instead of speaking, they drew up the shutters and looked out into the street. It seemed to them they were listening to a crackling of tensions within themselves, to something suddenly stirring into life and then becoming dormant again. They knew they could not live without each other, and that only together, like an ingenious structure of supports and counter-supports, could they carry the burden they had chosen. When they thought of each other, it all struck them as almost painfully morbid, so delicate and daring and incomprehensible did their relationship seem in its sensitiveness to the slightest instability within.

After a while, when the sight of the alien world outside had restored their sense of security, they felt tired and wanted only to fall asleep side by side. They felt nothing but each other, and yet there was — though by now quite small, disappearing into darkness — another feeling too: an opening out on all sides to the four quarters of the sky.

The next morning Claudine set out for the little town where her thirteen-year-old daughter Lilli was at boarding-school.

The child had been born in the time of her first marriage, but the father was an American dentist to whom Claudine had gone, being plagued by toothache during a holiday in the country. She had been vainly waiting for a visit from her lover, whose arrival had been delayed beyond the limits of her patience, and in a queer state of intoxication, compounded of frustration, pain, ether, and the dentist's round white face, which she had been seeing hovering over hers as though for days on end, it had happened. Her conscience never troubled her on account of this episode, nor indeed on account of any other such that had occurred in that first, wasted part of her life. When some weeks later she had to go for more treatment,

she went accompanied by her maid, and with that the affair was over; her memory of it was merely of a strange cloud of sensations that had for a while bewildered and agitated her, as if a cloak had been suddenly flung over her head and then had slid swiftly to the floor.

There was something strange about all her actions and experiences at that period. She could not always bring them to such a quick and sober end as on that one occasion; indeed, at times she seemed to be entirely under the domination of one man or the other, for each of whom she was capable of doing everything demanded of her, to the point of complete self-abnegation and lack of any will of her own. Yet she was never left with any sense of having had intense or important experiences. She performed and suffered acts of a passion so violent as to amount to humiliation, but never lost the awareness that whatever she did, fundamentally it did not touch her. These excesses committed by an unhappy, ordinary, promiscuous woman were like a brook rushing along, always away from her, and her only feeling was of sitting quietly on its bank, lost in thought.

It was an awareness of some ultimate integrity deep within her, never clearly defined, yet always present, that brought about this final reserve and assurance that she had even in her headlong abandonment of herself to others. Behind all the intricacies of her actual experiences there was a current of something undiscovered, and although she had never yet grasped this hidden quintessence of her life, perhaps even believing that she would never be capable of penetrating to it, nevertheless, whatever happened, it gave her a sense of liberty such as a guest may have in a strange house, knowing he will be there only on that one occasion and therefore resigning himself, nonchalantly and with a trace of boredom, to whatever comes his way.

And then all she had done and suffered sank into oblivion when she met the man who was now her husband. There and then she entered into a tranquillity and seclusion in which whatever had gone before no longer mattered. All that

mattered was what would come of it now, and the past seemed to have been only so that they might experience each other the more intensely — or else it was forgotten. An overpowering sensation of growth rose about her like drifts of blossom, and only a long way off did there linger a sense of suffering endured, a background from which everything detached itself, as in the warmth frost-stiffened limbs slowly and drowsily stir into movement.

There was, perhaps, one feeling that ran, a thin, pale, and scarcely perceptible thread, from her former into her present life. Her having to think of that former life again precisely today might have been chance or might have been because she was travelling to see her child. Whatever its cause, it had emerged only at the railway station, when — among all those many people, and oppressed and disquieted by them — she had suddenly been touched by a sensation that, even as it drifted by, only half recognised, already vanishing, conjured up, obscurely and distantly and yet with almost corporeal verisimilitude, that almost forgotten period of her life.

Claudine's husband had had no time to see her off at the station, and she was alone, waiting for the train, with the crowd pushing and jostling and, like a great ponderous wave of slop-water, slowly shoving her this way and that. Upon the pallid, early-morning faces that were all around her emotions seemed to float through this dark precinct like spawn on wan pools of stagnant water. It nauseated her. She felt an urge to brush out of her way, with a negligent gesture, all that was here drifting and shoving; but whether because of the horrifying physical dominance of what surrounded her or only because of this dim, monotonous, indifferent light under a gigantic roof of dirty glass and a tangle of iron girders, while she passed, with apparent calm and composure, through the crowd, she felt the compulsion she was under, and she suffered as under a humiliation. In vain she sought shelter within herself; it was as though she had slowly and meanderingly lost herself in this throng — her eyes strayed, she was no longer fully aware of her own existence, and when she strained to

remember, a thin soft headache hung like a cloud before her thoughts and her thoughts leaned into it, trying to reach her yesterday. But all that she seized of it was a feeling as if she were secretly carrying something precious and delicate. And she knew she must not betray this to others, because they would not understand and because she was weaker and could not defend herself and was afraid. Slender, shrinking into herself, she walked among them, inwardly arrogant but starting and withdrawing whenever anyone came too near, and hiding behind an unassuming air. And at the same time, in secret delight, she felt the happiness of her life growing more beautiful as she yielded and abandoned herself to this quiet, confused anxiety.

And that was how she recognised what it all amounted to. For this was what it had been like at that other period. What she suddenly felt was: *once, long ago...* as though for a long time she had been somewhere else, though never really far away. There was something twilit and uncertain in her, like insane people's frightened concealment of their passions, and her actions tore loose from her in shreds and were borne away in the memories of strangers. Nothing had ever impregnated her with that fruitful germ of experience which softly begins to swell a soul when those who have stripped it of its petals turn away, satiated... Yet all she suffered shone as with the pallid glitter of a crown, and the dull humming anguish that was the background of her life was shot with a tremulous gleam. At times then she felt as if her sorrows were burning like little flames in her, and something impelled her to keep on lighting new ones. And, doing so, she seemed to feel the pressure of a diadem cutting into her brow, invisible and unreal as something spun of dream-glass. And sometimes it was only a far-off, circling chant inside her head...

Claudine sat quite still while the train travelled through the landscape, quietly shaking and rocking. The other people in the carriage talked to each other, but she heard it only as a distant buzz. And while she was thinking of her husband, and her thoughts were enclosed in a soft, weary happiness as in

snow-filled air, for all the softness there was something that kept her from moving, as when a convalescent, accustomed to being within four walls, is about to take the first steps out of doors — a happiness that keeps one transfixed and is almost agonising. And behind that again there was still that undefined, wavering chant which she could not quite catch, remote, blurred, like a childhood song, like a pain, like herself... In wide, rippling circles it drew her thoughts after it, and she could not see into its face.

She leaned back and gazed out of the window. It fatigued her to think about that any more. Her senses were alert and achingly perceptive, but there was something behind the senses that wanted to be quiet and expand and let the world glide away over it... Telegraph-poles slid slanting past. The fields with their dark brown furrows standing out of the snow rolled past and away. Bushes stood as though on their heads, with hundreds of straddling little legs from which there hung thousands of tiny bells of water, dripping, trickling, flashing and glittering... There was something gay and light about it all, a dilation as when walls open out — something loosened and unburdened and full of tenderness. And from her own body too the gentle weight was now lifted, leaving in her ears a sensation as of melting snow, gradually passing over into a ceaseless, light, loose tinkling. She felt as if with her husband she were living in the world as in a foaming sphere full of beads and bubbles and little feathery rustling clouds. She closed her eyes and abandoned herself to it.

But after a while she began to think again. The light, regular swaying of the train, the volatility and liquescence of nature there outside — it was as if some pressure had lifted; and she suddenly realised that she was on her own. Involuntarily she glanced up. There was still that softly whirling vortex in her senses; but it was like going up to a door that had always been shut and suddenly finding it wide open. Perhaps she had long felt the desire for this; perhaps there were tides that ebbed and flowed in the love between herself and her husband; but all she had known of it was that ever and again

it drew them more closely together. And now it had secretly burst open something within her that had long been locked up. Slowly, as out of an almost invisible but very deep wound, an unceasing stream of little drops, the thoughts and feelings welled up, making the wound always larger.

There are, in the relationship to those one loves, a great many problems that become buried under the edifice of the shared life before they can be fully worked out; and later the sheer weight of things as they have actually turned out leaves one no strength even to imagine it all differently. Then somewhere on the way there will stand some queer sign-post, there will be some face, a hovering fragrance, an untrodden path petering out amid grass and stones, and the traveller knows he should turn and take the other road, but everything urges him forward; and all that impedes his steps is something like cobwebs, dreams, a rustling branch — and some thought that has never taken on shape quietly paralyses him. Recently it had sometimes happened, perhaps increasingly, that there was this looking back, a more intense leaning into the past. Claudine's constancy revolted against it, for this constancy was not repose but a setting free of forces, a mutual lending of support, an equilibrium arising out of unceasing movement forwards. It was a running hand-in-hand. Then, in the midst of it, there would come this temptation to stand still, to stand there all alone and look around. At such times she would feel her passion as something tyrannical, compulsive, threatening to sweep her away; and even when the temptation was overcome and she felt remorseful and was once again seized with awareness of how beautiful her love was, that awareness was rigid and ponderous as a narcotic state, and she apprehended, with delight and dismay, how each of her movements was laced into it, tall and bulky and stiff as though encased in gold brocade. And yet somewhere there was still a lure, something that lay quiet and pale as the sunny shadows of the month of March upon earth aching with spring.

Even in her happiness Claudine was occasionally assailed by a sense of how it was all merely a fact, almost accidental;

and she sometimes wondered whether there must not be some other kind of life in store for her, different and remote. This was perhaps only the shape of a thought, an outer shell, which had remained with her from earlier times, and not a real thought with any intention behind it — only a sensation such as might once have gone with the real thought, an empty, unresisting motion, all a peering and a looking beyond, which, withdrawing always and never fulfilled, had long lost its content and was like the entrance to a dark tunnel in her dreams.

But perhaps this was some other, solitary happiness, much more wonderful than everything else. It was something loose, limber, and obscurely sensitive at a point in their relationship where in other people's love there is nothing but a solid substructure, bony and inanimate. There was a faint unrest in her, an almost morbid yearning for extreme tension, the premonition of an ultimate climax. And sometimes it was as though she were destined to suffer some unimaginable sorrow in love.

Now and then when she was listening to music this premonition touched her soul secretly, somewhere a long way out... She would feel a start of terror, suddenly aware of her soul's existenc in the realm of the undefined. But every year, as winter passed away, there came a time when she felt nearer to those outermost frontiers than at other times. During those naked, strengthless days, suspended between life and death, she felt a melancholy that could not be that of ordinary craving for love; it was almost a longing to turn away from this great love that she possessed, as though faintly glimmering ahead of her there were the road of an ultimate destiny, leading her no longer to her beloved but away from him, defenceless, out into the soft, dry, withered expanses of some agonising desert. And she realised that this came from a distant place where their love was no longer solely between the two of them, but was something with pallid roots insecurely clutching at the world.

When they walked together, their shadows had only the

faintest tinge of colour and dangled loosely at their heels as though incapable of binding their footsteps to the ground they walked on; and the ring of hard earth under their feet was so curt and clipped, and the bare bushes so stared into the sky, that in those hours a-shudder with enormous visibility it was as if all at once all things, the mute and docile objects of this world, had weirdly disengaged themselves from them. And as the light began to fail, they themselves grew tall, towering like adventurers, like strangers, like unreal beings, spellbound by the fading echo of their own existence, knowing themselves to be full of shards of something incomprehensible to which there was nowhere any response and which was rejected by all things, so that only a broken gleam of it fell into the world, forlornly and irrelevantly flickering here and there, now over an object, now in a vanishing thought.

Then she could imagine belonging to another man, and it seemed not like betrayal but like some ultimate marriage, in a realm where they had no real being, where they existed only as music might, a music heard by no one, echoing back from nowhere. For then she felt her own existence merely as a line that she herself incised, gratingly, just to hear herself in the bewildering silence; it was simply something leading from one moment to the next, something in which she became, inexorably and irrelevantly, identical with whatever it was she did — and yet always remained something she could never achieve. And while it suddenly seemed to her as though perhaps they loved each other as yet only with all the loudness of a refusal to hear a faint, frantically intense and anguished call, she had a foreboding of the deeper complications and vast intricacies that came about in the intervals, in the silences, in the moments of awakening out of that uproar into the shoreless world of facts, awakening to stand, with nothing but a feeling, among mindless and mechanical happenings; and it was with the pain of their tall and lonely separateness, standing side by side — something against which all else was no more than an anaesthetising and shutting off and lulling

of oneself to sleep with sheer noise — that she loved him when she thought of doing him the final, the mortal injury.

Even weeks after such an experience her love still had this colouring; then that would gradually fade. But often, when she felt the proximity of another man, it would return, though fainter. It sufficed that there should be someone there — a man of no real concern to her, saying something of no real concern to her — and she would feel herself being gazed at as from that other realm, with a look of amazement that held the question: 'Why are you still here?' She never felt any desire for such outsiders; it was painful to her to think of them; indeed it disgusted her. But all at once there would be that intangible wavering of the stillness around her; and then she would not know whether she was rising or sinking...

Now Claudine looked out of the window. Out there it was all just the same as before. But — whether as a result of her thoughts or for some other reason — now it was overlaid by a stale, unyielding resistance, as if she were looking through a film of something milky and repugnant. That volatile, thousand-legged gaiety had become unendurably tense; it was all a restless prancing and trickling, all over-excitement and mimicry, with pygmy footsteps, far too lively and yet, for her, dull and dead. Here and there it flung itself upwards, an empty clatter, brushing past as with tremendous friction.

It was physically painful to gaze out into all that stir, for which she no longer had any feeling. All that life, which only a short while ago had been one with her emotions, was still there outside, overbearing and callous; but as soon as she tried to draw it to her, the things crumbled away and fell to pieces under her gaze. What came about was an ugliness that twisted and turned in her eyes, as though her soul were leaning outwards there, leaning far out, taut, stretching after something, groping into emptiness.

It occurred to her that she too — just like all that was around her — spent her life passively, a captive in her own being, committed to one place, to a particular city, to one house in that city, one habitation and one sense of herself,

year after year within that tiny area; and with that it seemed as though, if she were to stop and linger for one single moment, her happiness might rush past her and away, like this rumbling, roaring mass rushing through the countryside, rushing away from everything.

This was no mere random thought. On the contrary, there was in it an element of that unbounded, uprearing blankness in which her feelings groped vainly for any support. She was impalpably assailed by something like what comes upon a climber on the rock-face: an utterly cold, still moment when she could hear herself as an unintelligible small sound on that huge surface and then, in the abrupt silence, realised the faintness of her own existence, creeping along, and how great, in contrast, and how full of dreadful forgotten sounds was the stony brow of the void.

And while she was shrinking from this like a delicate skin, feeling in her very fingertips the fear of thinking about herself, and while her sensations clung to her like granules and her emotions trickled away like sand, she again heard that peculiar sound: it seemed a mere point, like a bird hovering high in the empty air.

She was overwhelmed by a sense of destiny. It lay in her having set out on this journey, in the way nature was withdrawing before her, in her having been so scared and huddled and timid even at the very beginning of the journey — scared of herself, of others, and of her happiness. And all at once her past seemed the imperfect expression of something that was yet to come.

She continued to gaze anxiously out of the window. But gradually, under the impact of the huge strangeness out there, her mind began to be ashamed of all its protestation and struggle, and it seemed to pause. And now it was becoming imbued with that very subtle, final, passive strength which lies in weakness, and it grew thinner and slighter than a child, softer than a sheet of faded silk. And she experienced her apartness and exclusion from everything in the world, a sense of being forced to the very edge of life — the moment just

before the plunge into the eyeless, empty vastness of space — and experienced that profoundest of human ecstasies only as a mild, nostalgic delight.

She began obscurely to yearn for her past, wasted and exploited as it had been by people who were strangers to her — yearning for it as for the pale, weak wakefulness there was in the depths of illness, when in the house the sounds moved from one room to another and she no longer belonged anywhere, but, relieved of the pressure of her own personality, continued to lead another life, floating somewhere else.

Outside, the landscape stormed soundlessly by. In her thoughts people grew very tall and loud and confident, and she huddled into herself, escaping from them, until there was nothing left of her but her nullity, her imponderability, a drifting somewhere towards something. And the train began to travel very quietly, with long, gently rocking movements, through country that still lay under deep snow, and the sky came lower and lower until it seemed only a few paces ahead, trailing along the ground in grey, dark curtains of slowly drifting flakes. Inside the train twilight gathered, yellowish, and the outlines of her fellow-passengers were only vaguely visible: they swayed to and fro, slowly and spectrally. She was no longer aware of what she was thinking, and pleasure in being alone with strange experiences now took a quiet hold of her: it was like the play of very faint, almost intangible inquietudes and of great shadowy stirrings of the soul, groping for them. She tried to remember her husband, but all she could find of her almost vanished love was a weird notion as of a room where the windows had long been kept shut. She made an effort to get rid of this, but it yielded only a very little and remained lurking nearby. And the world was as pleasantly cool as a bed in which one stays behind alone... Then she felt as if she were about to be faced with a decision, and she did not know why she felt this, and she was neither glad nor resentful; all she felt was that she did not want either to act or to prevent action. And her thoughts slowly wandered into the snow outside, without a backward glance, always deeper

and deeper into the snow, as when one is too tired to turn back and so walks on and on.

Towards the end of the journey the well-dressed man said: « An idyll, an enchanted island, a lovely woman at the centre of a fairy-tale of white *dessous* and lace... » and made a gesture at the landscape. 'How silly,' Claudine thought, but she could not find a suitable retort.

It was like someone knocking at the door and a big dark face floating behind pale window-panes. She did not know who this person was; she did not care who he was. All she felt was that here was someone wanting something. And now something was beginning to take on shape and become real.

As when a faint wind rises among clouds, ordering them in a row, and slowly passes away, so she felt the motion of this materialising reality stirring the still, soft cloudiness of her feelings — insubstantial, passing through her, passing her by... And, as with many sensitive people, what attracted her in the unintelligible passage of events was all there was in it that was not herself, not of the spirit: what she loved was the helplessness and shame and anguish of her spirit — it was like striking something weaker than oneself, a child, a woman, and then wanting to be the garment wrapped about its pain, in the darkness, alone.

So they arrived, late in the afternoon, the train almost empty. One by one people had trickled away out of the compartments; station after station had sifted them out from among the other travellers. Now something swept them swiftly together, for there were only three sledges available for the hour's trip from the station to the township, and they had to be shared. Before Claudine knew where she was, she found herself seated with four other people in one of these small conveyances. From in front there came the unfamiliar smell of the horses steaming in the cold, and ripples of scattered light from the lanterns. But at times, too, darkness came flooding right up to the sledge, and even through it, and then she

could see they were travelling between two ranks of tall trees, as though along a dark corridor that became ever narrower the closer they came to their goal.

Because of the cold she sat with her back to the horses. Opposite her was that man — big, bulky, encased in his fur coat. He blocked the way along which her thoughts strove to travel back home. Suddenly, as though a door had slammed, every glance of hers encountered his dark figure there before her. She realised that she had glanced at him several times in order to make sure what he looked like, as though that were all that mattered now and everything else were long settled. She was excited to find that he remained entirely vague; he might have been anyone; he was no more than a sombre bulk of alien being. And sometimes this seemed to shift closer to her, like a moving forest with its tangle of tree-trunks. And it weighed on her.

Meanwhile talk spread like a net among the people in the little sledge. He joined in, making responses of the tritely well-turned kind that many people make, with a pinch of that spice which is like a sharp, confident aura enveloping a man in a woman's presence. In these moments of male dominance, so much a matter of course, she became uneasy and embarrassed and was ashamed at not rebuffing his insinuating remarks. And yet when she, in her turn, could not avoid speaking, she felt it came all too easily to her, and she had an awareness of herself as of a feeble, ineffective waving with the stump of an amputated arm.

Then indeed she observed how helplessly she was being flung this way and that, at each curve in the road being touched now on the arms, now at the knees, sometimes with the whole upper part of her body leaning against some other person's body; and remotely, yet in strange excitement, she experienced it as if this small sledge were a darkened room and these people were seated around her, hot and urgent, and she were timidly a prey to shameless acts that she endured, smiling, as if not noticing anything, her eyes focussed straight ahead of her.

All this was like feeling an irksome dream in half-sleep, always remaining slightly conscious of its unreality, always marvelling at feeling it so strongly. Then a moment came when that man leaned out, looked up at the sky, and said: « We're going to be snowed up. »

With a start her thoughts leapt into complete wakefulness. She glanced up: the people were exchanging cheerful, harmless pleasantries, as those do who at the end of a long journey through darkness get their first glimpse of light and of tiny figures in the distance. And all at once she had a strangely indifferent, sober sense of reality. But she noticed with astonishment that something nevertheless touched her, moved her intensely. It frightened her a little, for it was a pale, almost unnatural lucidity, in which nothing could sink into the vagueness of reverie and through which no thought moved and within which nevertheless people now and then became jagged and huge as hills, as if suddenly gliding through an invisible fog where all that was real expanded, taking on a gigantic, shadowy, second outline. Then she felt something that was almost humility and dread; yet she never quite lost the awareness that this weakness was only a peculiar faculty: it was as if the frontiers of her being had extended, invisibly and sensitively, and everything came into faint collision with them, setting up tremors. And for the first time she was truly startled by this queer day, the solitariness of which, like a passage leading underground, had gradually sunk with her into the confused whisperings of multitudinous inner twilight and now suddenly, in a distant region, ascended into the midst of inexorably actual events, leaving her in a vast, unfamiliar, unwanted reality.

Furtively she looked across at the stranger. He was striking a match: for an instant his beard and one eye were lit up. And even this trivial act seemed remarkable; she felt the solidity of it, felt how naturally one thing linked with the next and was merely there, insensate and calm and yet like a simple and tremendous power, stone interlocked with stone. She reflected that he was certainly quite an ordinary person. And

at that she had again a faint, elusive, intangible sense of her own existence; she felt herself floating in the dark before him, dissolved and tattered, like pale, frothing foam, and felt an odd stimulus in answering him agreeably. And even while speaking she watched herself and what she was doing, helpless, unmoved in spirit, and yet with an enjoyment that was divided between pleasure and torment, which made her feel as though she were crouching in the innermost depths of some great and ever expanding exhaustion.

It struck her that this was the way it had sometimes begun in the past. At the thought of such a recurrence her mind reeled with voluptuous, enervated horror as of some still nameless sin. She wondered whether he had noticed her looking at him, and her body filled with a faint, almost docile sensuality — a dark hiding-place for the stealthy urges of the soul within. But the stranger sat there in the darkness, large and quiet, merely smiling sometimes — or perhaps even that only seemed so to her.

So they travelled on into the falling night, at close quarters, facing each other. And gradually her thoughts were again invaded by that softly forward-thrusting unrest. She tried telling herself that all this was nothing but delusions, arising out of the confused inner stillness of this sudden lonely journey amid strangers, and then again she would think it was the wind wrapping her with its stiff, searing cold, petrifying her, robbing her of her will; and then at other times it oddly seemed to her as if her husband were very near to her and all this sensual weakness were some ineffable aspect of their great love. And once — when she had just glanced across at the stranger again and was conscious of this shadowy abandonment of her will, all her firmness and inviolability gone — suddenly there was a radiance high and bright over her past, as over an indescribable, strangely ordered panorama. It was a queer premonition, as if all that seemed long past and gone were about to come alive again. But in the next moment it was no more than a fading streak of comprehension in the darkness, and all that remained was something faintly rever-

berating within her, rather as if it had been the never-before-glimpsed landscape of her love, filled with colossal forms and a quiet rushing sound, confused and alien, she no longer knew where. And she felt herself lingeringly and softly enveloped in her own being, which was full of strange, not yet decipherable resolutions whose origin was in that other realm.

She could not help thinking of the days to come, isolated from the rest of her days, lying ahead of her like a suite of remote rooms, each one opening into the next. And all this time she heard the beat of the horses' hooves, bearing her — helplessly flung into the meaningless actuality of this situation, these close quarters here in the sledge — nearer to all that was to come. With hasty, nervous laughter she joined in a commonplace conversation; but within her everything was vast and ramified, and she was helpless before the incomprehensibility of all things as under a huge cloak of silence.

In the night she woke up: it was as though little bells had been jingling. She knew at once it was snowing. She looked towards the window; there it was in the air outside, soft, and heavy as a wall. Barefoot, she tiptoed to the window. It was all a matter of an instant. Darkly she sensed that she put her naked feet to the ground like an animal. Then, with her face close to the glass, she stared numbly out into the dense trellis-work of the snowflakes. She did all this as one may, starting up from sleep, with a consciousness so narrowly confined that it is like a little uninhabited island emerging from the sea. It was as if she were standing a long way off from herself. And all at once she remembered, and remembered even the emphasis with which he had said it: 'We're going to be snowed up.'

She tried to collect herself. Turning round, she saw how small and cramped the room was. And there was something strange in this smallness, as of being caged, of being beaten.

She lit a candle and held it high, moving its light over the things. Slowly the sleep began to ebb from them, but they

were still as though they had not yet quite found their way back into themselves. Wardrobe, chest of drawers, and bed, there they were, and yet there was somehow either too much or too little, a mere shadowy nothing, a harsh whispering shadow of nothingness. Blank and sunken they stood in the bleak half-light from the flickering candle, and over table and walls there lay an endless feeling of dust, and of walking, walking barefoot through an infinity of dust. Outside the room there was a narrow passage with a wooden floor and whitewashed walls; at the top of the stairs, she knew, there was a dim lamp hanging in a wire ring, casting five pale, swaying circles on the ceiling, and beyond that the light trickled away on the chalky walls, like marks left by dirty fumbling hands. Five pale, senselessly swaying circles were like five sentries guarding a strangely excited emptiness... All around were people she did not know, all asleep. She felt a wave of sudden unreal heat and she almost began to scream, faintly, the way cats sometimes scream in fear and desire, as she stood there, wide awake in the night, while soundlessly the last shadow of her actions, strange even to herself, slipped back behind the now smooth walls of her inner being. And suddenly she thought: 'Supposing he came now... supposing he did... I know he wants to...'

She was desperately startled. Something rolled away over her like a glowing ball. For minutes there was only this wild panic and behind it the constriction of the room, a soundless strait, tense as a cracked whip. She tried to form a mental image of the man. But she failed; all she could feel was the warily prowling, beast-like tread of her own thoughts. Only now and then she caught a partial glimpse of him as he was in reality — his beard, one gleaming eye... And she was sickened. She could never again belong to a stranger. And precisely there, precisely coincident with this abhorrence of all other men that rose in her body, with its mysterious yearning only for the one, she felt — as though on some other, deeper plane — a leaning over, a vertigo, and sensed the depth of all human insecurity. And with it went something like dread of herself,

something that was perhaps also an intangible, irrational, groping desire that the stranger should really come. Fear swept through her like the biting cold that comes as though driven by the current of some destructive lustful urge.

Somewhere a clock began tranquilly talking to itself. Footsteps passed under her window and faded away. Quiet voices... The room was chilly; the warmth of sleep slipped away from her skin, and vaguely, unresistingly, she swayed to and fro with it in the dark as in a cloud of faintness. The things around her made her feel ashamed, hard and straight as they were — once again disengaged, once again entirely themselves, blankly staring at nothing, while she was confusedly conscious of standing there, waiting for a stranger. And yet she realised obscurely that it was not the stranger who tempted her, but simply this standing and waiting, a fine-toothed, savage, abandoned ecstasy in being herself, in being alive, awake here among these lifeless objects — ecstasy that had opened like a wound. And while she felt her heart beating, like some frenzied wild creature trapped within her breast, her body in its quiet swaying drew itself up, like a great exotic, nodding flower that suddenly shudders with the infinitely expanding rapture of mysterious union as it closes round its captive. And softly, far off, she could hear the beloved's heart wandering unquiet, restless, homeless, chiming through the stillness like the lilt of some wind-blown, remote music, flickering as starlight; and she was moved by the haunting loneliness of these chords that were in quest of her, moved as by some vast diapason resounding far beyond the limits of the human soul.

Now it seemed to her that something was about to reach fulfilment and, standing there, she lost all count of time. Minutes... hours... time lay motionless around her, fed from invisible springs, a shoreless lake, without beginning or end. Only once, at some moment she was but vaguely aware of, something slid darkly across the outermost reaches of her mind: a thought, a notion... And as it passed, she recognised it as the memory of dreams long lost, of dreams belonging to her former life, in which she thought herself enslaved by

enemies and was compelled to perform humiliating acts; but even as she recognised it, it began to diminish and disappear. One last time it rose out of the hazy distance, phantom-clear, sharply outlined against the background like the rigging of a ship, masts and tackle... and she remembered how she had always been defenceless, remembered her own shrieks waking her from sleep, and how she had struggled in dull despair until her strength gave out and her senses reeled — all the shapeless, boundless misery of that earlier life... Then it was gone. In the stillness that closed in round her again there was only a radiance, a last lapping wave, a lull, as though something unutterable had happened. And then from there beyond — from there where once, behind her dreams, this terrible helplessness of hers had lived another, second life, remote, intangible, imaginary — suddenly she was overtaken by a sense of promise, a glimmer of longing, and knew a surrender such as she had never known before, a naked, bare self-awareness that the irrevocability of her fate had stripped of anything personal and which, while driving her towards ever deeper frenzies of exhaustion, yet weirdly bemused her, as though it were, far within her, the stray tender particle of a love in quest of its own perfection — a love for which there are still no words in the language of day, that language with its heavy upright gait on solid ground.

She did not know whether it had been only a short time ago, just before waking, that she dreamt that dream once more. For years she had not dreamt it, had not even thought of it, and now all at once this dream and the time to which it belonged seemed to be quite close, hovering just behind her. It was like turning round and suddenly staring into a face. How strange it was! — as if here in this lonely room her life were turning back upon itself like tangled traces going round and round in an enormous plain.

Behind her back there shone the little light that she had lit; her face was in darkness. Gradually she lost the feeling of her own shape, and her outlines seemed to become the limits of some monstrous cavity in this darkness, in this

lingering moment that enveloped her. She began to feel as if she were not really here at all, as if merely something of herself had long ago set out and had been travelling ever since through space and through the years, and were now wakening here, alone and lost, at an infinite remove from that real self which she was, she herself standing still somewhere in the sunken realm of her old dream. Somewhere... a place she lived in... people... a dreadful maze of fear... The blood shot into her face, her lips grew soft, and she realised: it *was* going to happen all over again... another of them... And the feeling of her loosened hair, her open arms, was different and as of long ago, as if all she had done then were an act of unfaithfulness here and now. And as in dismay she clung to the wish to keep herself for her beloved — her raised, imploring hands now slowly tiring — there came the thought:

« We were unfaithful to each other before we knew each other... »

It was the mere gleam of a thought, hardly more than a tremor — an exquisite and lovely bitterness, just as in the wind that rises from the sea there is sometimes a whiff of keener freshness, an intenser presence that lingers fleetingly and then drifts away — almost the thought: we loved each other before we knew each other. And it was as if the infinite tension of their love all at once expanded far beyond the present into that earlier unfaithfulness from which it had first come to them, as though deriving from some older form of its eternal existence between them.

She sank down and for a long time, as though stunned, was aware of nothing except of sitting on a hard chair at a bare table. Her thoughts strayed to the talk they had had before her journey, about the man G., that figure in a novel — the veiled words and the words never uttered. And then she realised that through a chink in the window there came the moist, mild air of the snow-laden night, faintly caressing her bare shoulders. And remotely, mournfully, as a wind blows over rain-darkened fields, she began to think it would be a

delight like quiet rain, like a sky over-arching a landscape, to be unfaithful — a mysterious, last, deathly delight.

With the morning there came a queer atmosphere of the past, pervading everything.

Claudine intended going to the school. She had woken early and it had been like rising out of heavy, clear water. She remembered nothing of all that had stirred her during the night. She moved the looking-glass to the window and began to put her hair up. It was still dark in the room. But while she was doing her hair, straining her eyes to see herself in the small, tarnished glass, she was overcome by a feeling that, somehow, here was a peasant girl beautifying herself for her Sunday outing. She felt quite strongly that it was all for the benefit of the schoolmasters who would see her, or perhaps for the stranger. She could not rid herself of this senseless notion. It did not spring from her inner being, but it clung to everything she did: all her movements took on something of oafishly sensual affectation, at once straddling and mincing, and slowly, disgustingly, irresistibly, it seeped from the surface down into the depths. After a while she paused to rest her arms. All this was really quite silly and could not prevent what was bound to happen. But while the fancy remained — merely swinging to and fro, with an intangible suggestion of things forbidden and things desired and undesired, all part of another chain of events that was mistier and less corporeal than that of real decisions, yet remotely accompanying all she did — and while her fingers slid through her soft hair, the sleeves of her wrap slipping up her bare arms, it seemed to her again that at some point in time — once? always? — it had all been like this before. And it struck her as odd that now when she was awake, here in the emptiness of the morning, her arms were moving up and down as though subject not to her own will but to some other, alien, indifferent power. And then slowly the mood of the past night began to reassert itself, and memories rose almost to the surface of her

mind, only to sink away again. A tension lay between her and those half-remembered experiences, like a quivering curtain.

Outside the windows day was breaking, bright and uneasy. Looking out into the monotonous, blank light, Claudine felt a stirring like the voluntary loosening of her fingers' grasp, a slow, alluring sensation of gliding down among silvery shining bubbles and motionless fishes, strange and goggle-eyed. The day began.

She took a sheet of paper and wrote a few words to her husband: « It's all so odd. It'll only be for a few days, but I feel as if I were somewhere high above myself, involved in something I don't understand. Tell me, what is our love? What is it? I need help, I need to hear you! I know it is like a tower, but what I feel is only the trembling of something that is high, high above the world... »

When she went to the post-office to post the letter, she was told that communications had broken down.

She walked to the edge of the town. There the plain stretched away into the distance, a wide, white sea. Sometimes a crow flew through this whiteness; here and there a bush stood out, black and stiff. Only some small, dark dots strewn along the far skyline were a sign that over there, too, there was human life.

Turning back, she walked through the streets, restlessly, for perhaps an hour. She went through all the sidestreets, after a while finding herself covering the same ground, only in the other direction, and turned aside again, crossing squares where she had the feeling of how she had walked there just a few minutes earlier. Everywhere there was the same white play of reflections from the empty plain, a feverish flicker sliding through this little town that was cut off from all reality. Before the houses there lay high banks of snow. The air was clear and dry. It was still snowing a little, but the flakes were falling thinly — flat, almost shrivelled, glittering little scales — as if it might stop soon. Here and there, from over the shut doors of the houses, windows looked down into the street with a bright blue glassy gaze, and the ground underfoot rang

like glass too. Sometimes a piece of hard, frozen snow crashed down through a gully, tearing a jagged hole in the stillness. And suddenly the wall of a house would shine in rosy light, or in delicate canary-yellow... Then all Claudine did seemed oddly heightened, more intensely alive; and in the hushed silence all things visible seemed to light one another up, as it were echoing one another in a larger visibility. And then it would all withdraw into itself again and in meaningless streets the houses stood like little groups of mushrooms in the woods, or like a thicket of wind-bent shrubs on a wide plain, while she still felt a dizziness and an immensity beyond. There was in her some kind of fire, some burning-bitter fluid, and while she walked and mused, she seemed to herself a huge, mysterious vessel that was being carried through the streets — a thin-walled, flaming vessel.

She tore up the letter and went to the school, where she spent the time till midday in discussion with the masters.

The rooms there were quiet. When, from where she sat, she looked through the sombre, heavy vault out into the open, everything seemed remote and muted, veiled in grey, snowy light. Then the men with her seemed too corporeal, oppressively ponderous, like great weights pressing down on hard, sharp ground. Her discussions with them were of the most matter-of-fact kind, but at moments even that seemed almost like abandonment. She wondered at this, for she did not like these men at all. There was not one among them who was in the slightest attractive to her; they all repelled her by their manners, which told of their lack of breeding. Yet she sensed the masculinity, the other sex, in them with an acuteness never experienced before, or at least not for many years. She realised that this was caused by the expression of their faces, enhanced by the half-light, by the dull commonness in them that was, as it were, exalted by their very ugliness, by a whiff of rutting-time, of enormous, clumsy, troglodyte beasts, that hung about them like an aura. She recognised again, here too, that old feeling of defencelessness which had overcome her time and again since she had been

alone. A peculiar submissiveness crept into all she did and said, into every detail, every turn of the conversation. It was there in the attentiveness with which she felt compelled to listen, even in the very fact that she was there, sitting in a chair, talking.

Claudine grew restive. She had lingered much too long, and the atmosphere and the half-darkness of the rooms closed in on her, suffocating and bewildering her. For the first time she was struck by the idea that all that had prevented her from sliding back into her former life was the fact that she had never before been away from her husband, on her own.

What she felt now was no longer vague, roving, inscrutable: it was now associated with real people. Yet it was not these men she was afraid of, but her own reactions. While their talk surrounded her, something stirred within her, shook her mysteriously — not one distinct emotion, but the very foundation of all emotions — as it may happen when one walks through other people's homes, places that fill one with distaste, and gradually, insidiously, one begins to think how these other people can live and be happy there, until there comes a moment when it all takes hold of one, and one wants to jump free and, transfixed, feels on all sides how the world revolves, solidly, quietly, round this centre too.

In the grey gloom here these black, bearded men became giant shapes inside twilit bubbles, alien worlds, and she wondered what it would feel like to be enclosed in such a world. Her thoughts seemed to sink deep into soft, swampy ground; and then there was only a voice, roughened by smoking, and words, muffled in a haze of cigarette-smoke, that constantly brushed against her face, and after that another voice, high and tinny, and she tried to imagine this second voice breaking and deepening in sexual excitement. Then again clumsy gestures caught her attention, drawing her feelings after them in weird convolutions. There was one ludicrous Olympian whom she tried to regard as would a woman who took him seriously. Something strange that had nothing to do with her own life rose up before her, casting its

shadow on her, too close, too big, like a shaggy animal that gave off an overpowering smell. She felt for a moment as if all she wanted were a whip to lash it with, and then, suddenly checked, but without really understanding, she caught the play of expressions intimately known of old in a face that somehow resembled her own.

Then she thought secretly: 'A woman like me might even be able to live with a man like one of these...' And in this thought there lay a queerly tormenting fascination, an expanding titillation of the brain; and there was something like a thin pane of glass before it, against which her thoughts pressed painfully to stare through it into a vague murkiness. She enjoyed looking into these men's eyes meanwhile with a limpid, innocent gaze. Then she tried to picture her husband, estranged and as though seen from that murky region beyond. She succeeded in thinking of him quite calmly: he remained a wonderful, an incomparable person, but something imponderable, something that reason could not grasp, had left him, and he seemed somewhat faded and not so close to her as before. Sometimes, when an illness reaches its last critical stage, one's experiences have that cool, detached lucidity. How odd that once it had been possible really to experience these things with which she was now toying, that there had been a time when she would undoubtedly have felt about him just as she had been trying to feel about him now! All at once everything seemed very strange.

One moves, day in, day out, among the same people; one walks through the same countryside, through the same town, the same house; and this landscape, these people, go along with one, always, every day, at every step, in every thought, unresistantly. But one day, with a faint jolt, they stop: and there they stand, incomprehensibly stark and still, aloof, in some alien, stubborn atmosphere. And when one turns to look back at oneself, there is a stranger standing there with them. And so one has a past. 'But what is it?' Claudine asked herself. And there was no seeing what could have made the difference.

There was nothing simpler than the answer that it was oneself that had become different. But she began to feel a resistance to granting that possibility. And perhaps one does experience all that is great and fateful in the pattern of one's life only in some oddly reversed state of mind? While at one moment she could not understand the ease with which she felt a stranger to a past that once had been as close to her as her own body, and at the next moment could not understand how anything could ever have been different from the way it was now, something else occurred to her: now and then it happens that one sees something in the distance, an unfamiliar thing, and walks towards it, and at a certain point it enters into the circle of one's own life; but the place where one was before is now strangely empty. Or one has only to reflect: yesterday I did this, did that... Now and then there is a moment like an abyss, and at its edge, marooned and desolate, there stands an ailing person whom one does not know and who is gradually fading from sight. Only one does not often think of it. And in a flash of illumination she saw her whole life dominated by this inexplicable, unremitting betrayal that one commits in every instant, by cutting loose from oneself without knowing why and nevertheless sensing in it an ultimate, inexhaustible tenderness far removed from conscious thought, a tenderness through which one is more intimately linked with oneself than with any of one's actions. And while this is going on, for everyone else one remains always one and the same person.

And while these feelings were still shining clearly in her, their very depths revealed, it seemed to her as if the certainty that bore her outer life along, making it revolve round her, had all at once ceased to work. Her life began to fan out into a multitude of possibilities, unfolding like the serried scenery of many different lives; and, in a pallid, empty, unquiet area between, the schoolmasters loomed up, obscure, floating shapes, and sank as though in search of something, gazing at her, until, heavily, they fell into place again. She felt a quaint and melancholy pleasure in being the strange lady, sitting

here before them with an unapproachable smile, entrenched behind her physical appearance, while within herself she was merely a haphazard being, separated from them only by a deciduous husk, the tangible fabric of chance. And while talk issued from her lips, fast and meaningless, soulless, facile, unwinding like thread from a spool, she was slowly becoming bewildered by the thought that if the atmosphere that made up any of these men's existence were to close around her, all she would do then would be just as truly herself as if any given 'reality' were something without significance, merely something that comes spouting up through an indifferent crack in the surface of things, while far below, out of one's own reach, one's solitary self floats along in a stream of unborn realities whose otherwordly, gentle music no one else can hear. All her security, all her anxious clinging to the one beloved, now suddenly appeared arbitrary, irrelevant, and merely superficial, compared with her apprehension — almost beyond the grasp of mind — of the utterly other communion of their beings at that depth of solitude, in boundless, final, immutable inwardness.

And here was the lure when now she suddenly remembered the stranger. She realised that, since he desired her, all that was here still a mere toying with possibilities would, with him, become reality.

Something in her shuddered, something warned her. Sodomy, she thought. That is what it would amount to. But behind that there lay her love's ordeal: 'So that in the realm of reality, you shall feel: I... I... here under this beast! The unthinkable! So that, over there, you can never again believe in me solidly and simply. So that I shall become a mirage beyond your grasp, a glimmer that fades as soon as you let go of me. Only a mirage, a reflection, which means you will know: I am only something within you and by virtue of your own existence, am myself only as long as you hold me fast, and am something different — anything — when you let go of me, my beloved, with whom I am so strangely united...'

She was overtaken by the quiet, fickle sadness of the

adventurer, that mournfulness attaching to things one does not for their own sake but for the sake of having done them. She felt that somewhere the stranger was now waiting for her. Her shrunken field of vision was already dense with his presence, and the air close to her seemed filled with his breath. She grew restless and began to take her leave. She knew that her way was leading her straight to him, and the thought of the moment when it would have happened was like a cold hand gripping her body. It was as if something had taken hold of her and were dragging her towards a door. And she knew this door would slam behind her, and she struggled, and yet she was already craning forward, all her senses reaching out ahead.

When she encountered the man again he was no longer someone she was just beginning to know: the whole thing had become imminent. She realised that in the mean time he had been thinking about her too and had worked out his plan of action. She heard him say: « I have reconciled myself to the thought that you reject me. But never again will any man venerate you as unselfishly as I do. » Claudine did not answer. His words came slowly, emphatically; they did not affect her, but she could imagine what it would be like if they did. After a while she said: « Did you know? — we *are* snowed up! » Everything seemed as if she had experienced it once before; her words seemed to falter in the track of words she must have spoken once before. She paid no heed to her actions as such; what interested her was simply the distinction between what she was doing now and something identical in the past — the arbitrariness of it, this sense of something very intimate and yet accidental that went with the experience. And she had a vast, immobile awareness of her own existence with past and present rippling over it, ever recurrent, in little waves.

After a while he suddenly said: « I can feel there is something in you that hesitates. I know that hesitation. Every woman is faced with it at some point in her life. You respect your husband and you certainly don't wish to hurt him and

so you are on your guard. But actually, you know, you ought to shake all that off, for a while at any rate. You too need the great tempestuous experience. »

Again Claudine remained silent. He was bound to misinterpret her silence, and that gave her an odd sense of well-being. And in her silence she realised more profoundly that there was something in her that could not express itself through any action, that could not be harmed by any action, that could not defend itself because it lay deeper than the realm of words: something that, in order to be understood, had to be loved as it loved itself, something that she shared with no one but her husband. That was the inward communion, and what she was about to abandon to this stranger, for him to ravage, was only the surface of her being.

In this way they strolled along, talking. But her feelings were bending over the brink, and there was dizziness in her, and it made her feel ever more deeply the marvellously incomprehensible nature of her belonging to her only beloved. At moments it seemed to her that she was beginning to adapt herself to the man at her side, even though outwardly she appeared unchanged; and then sometimes it was as if jokes, phrases, and gestures from her earlier life were reawakening, things that she had thought herself grown out of long ago. « The lady has a wit, » he said.

When he spoke thus, walking at her side, she observed how his words went out into an utter void, which they gradually populated — first with the houses they were walking past — only these houses were a little different now, askew as one sees them mirrored in window-panes; and then there was the street too, and after a while she herself, also a little changed and distorted, though to herself still recognisable. She felt the force, the elemental vitality, emanating from this otherwise unremarkable man — causing a scarcely perceptible displacement of the surrounding world, a shifting and bending of things, flattening them out. It disconcerted her to see her own image too within that mirrorlike sliding world; it was as if she had only to yield a little more and she

would be entirely that image. Then there was a moment when he exclaimed: « Believe me, it's all a matter of habit. If, let's say, at seventeen or eighteen, you had met some other man and married him, today you would find it just as difficult to imagine yourself the wife of the man whom, as it happens, you *have* married. »

They came to where the church was. Tall and solitary they stood there in the wide square, and, looking at her companion, Claudine saw his gestures projecting out of him into the emptiness round about. For a moment she felt as if thousand of crystals bound together to form her body were bristling and writhing; a scattered, splintered, restlessly flickering light rose within her, and the man on whom it fell all at once looked quite different in the glitter of it: his outlines shifted closer to her, twitching, jerking like her own heart, and she felt each of his movements inside her, passing through her body. She wanted to call out, reminding herself who he was; but this feeling was only an insubstantial, chaotic gleam floating strangely somewhere within her, as though it had nothing to do with her.

And then everything seemed to disappear in a vortex of misty light. She glanced about her: there were the houses, as before, standing straight and silent around the square; in the tower the clock began to strike. Round and metallic the chimes came bowling through the dream-holes, dissolving as they fell, and skimming away over the roofs. Claudine imagined them rolling on over the countryside, far away, resounding, and all at once, in awe, she felt: voices go through the world, many-towered and massive, clangorous as brazen cities — something that is beyond reason, an independent, incomprehensible world of feeling, combining as it were arbitrarily and at random with the everyday world of reason and then again vanishing into stillness; something that is like those vast abysmal wings of darkness that sometimes move softly across a blank and rigid sky.

It was as if something were standing all around her and gazing at her. She felt the excitement in the man beside her,

a surging and billowing, a lashing out, lonely and sombre, in an expanse of futility. And gradually it began to seem to her that what this man desired of her, this act ostensibly so great and important, was something entirely impersonal; it amounted to no more than being gazed at like this, with a gaze all stupor and vacuity — just as dots in space, combined into a random pattern, gaze at each other inertly. It made her shrink, compressing her until it seemed that she herself was no more than such a dot. And this gave her an extraordinary feeling about herself, which was remote from normal rationality and self-awareness and yet left everything the same as always. She ceased to feel how repellently commonplace was the way this man's mind worked. She felt as if she were standing somewhere in open country, and around her the sounds in the air and the clouds in the sky stood quite still, entrenched in the space of this fleeting instant; and she herself was no different from them, a vapour merely, an echoing... and it seemed to her she could understand the way the animals loved, and the clouds, and the sounds in the air.

She felt the man's eyes searching for hers, and all at once she was frightened and longed for the solid certainty of her own existence; and she felt her clothes clinging to her, a husk enclosing the very last of the tenderness she knew to have been her own, and beneath that she felt her blood pulsing, and she could almost smell its quivering pungency. And all she had was this body that she was now to surrender, and this utterly other, spiritual feeling, this yearning beyond all reality, the soul's own feelings of the body — ultimate bliss. And she did not know whether now her love was taking the final, most daring step of all, or was already fading and her senses were curiously, inquisitively, opening all their windows...

Later, that evening, in the dining-room, she felt lonely. A woman spoke to her across the table: « I saw your little girl waiting for you this afternoon. What a charming child! She must be a great joy to you. » Claudine had not been to the school again and she did not know what to say. She felt

as if she were present among these people only with some insensitive part of herself, with her hair or nails, or with a body that was all of horn. She made some non-committal reply, and even while she spoke it seemed that her words became entangled in something, caught in something that was like a sack or a net. Her own words seemed alien among the alien words of others, like fishes struggling and jerking among the moist, cold bodies of other fishes, in the incoherent mesh of opinions.

She was overcome by disgust. Once again she felt that what mattered was not what she could say about herself, what she could explain in words, but that all justification lay elsewhere — in a smile, in a way of falling silent, in listening to oneself within. Suddenly she felt an ineffable longing for that one and only man who was as solitary as she and whom nobody here would understand either — for him who had nothing but that soft tenderness filled with floating pictures, a tenderness that like the veils of fever absorbs the hard thrust of material things, leaving all outer happenings behind in vast, dim flatness, while within everything remains secure in the eternal, mysterious balance of self-awareness.

But whereas at other times, in similar moods, a room crowded like this would be a solid, heavy, hot mass revolving round her, enveloping her, here and now it was different, and there was at times some furtive standstill, a dislocation of the things — a sideboard, a table, that then jumped into place again — an atmosphere of sullen rejection. Discord grew between her and these familiar objects; there was something uncertain, wavering, about them. All of a sudden there was again that ugliness which she had experienced on the journey, not a plain, straightforward ugliness, but something that made her perceptions, when they reached out like a hand for solid things, go right through them and come out the other side. Gaps opened up, as if — since that ultimate certainty within her had dreamily begun to contemplate itself — something in the order of things, at other times impalpably embedded in her, had worked loose, and where there had been a coher-

ent chain of impressions, a world of harmony, now everything was rent and riven, the surrounding world turned into mere unceasing noise.

Gradually it made her feel as someone might who walks at the edge of the sea: the feeling that one cannot make any impression on this roaring that tears away every thought and every action down to the bare bones of the present instant, until there comes uneasiness, an increasing sense of overflowing one's limits, of losing one's identity and pouring away: an urge to shout, a yearning for incredible, enormous gestures, a soaring flash of will, for action without end — action with the sole purpose of making one feel one's own existence. There was a ravening, annihilating force in this sense of dissolution, and every second of it was wild, irresponsible loneliness, cut off from everything, staring at the world in oblivious stupor. And it wrenched gestures and words from her, which seemed to rush past her, coming from somewhere else, and which yet were part of herself. And there before her sat that stranger, that man, and could not fail to notice how this was drawing her body closer to him, like a vessel containing all her longing and desire, all the deepest love she knew. Then she no longer saw anything but his beard going up and down as he talked, monotonously, lulling her to sleep, going up and down like the beard of some horrible he-goat that sat there muttering, slowly munching wisps of words.

She felt very sorry for herself. Everything turned into a rocking sing-song of grief at the thought that all this could really happen. He said: « I can tell — you are one of those women whose destiny it is to be swept away by a storm. Oh yes, you have your pride — and so you try to deny it. But believe me, a man who understands women is not deceived. »

It was as if she were sinking, irresistibly, back into her past. But when she gazed around her, as she sank through ages of the soul, which were like layer upon layer of deep water, what struck her was the random nature of her surroundings: not the fact that everything looked the way it did, but that this appearance persisted, adhering to things

as if it were part of them, perversely holding on to them as with claws; it was like an expression of feeling that has remained on a face long after the feeling has gone. And oddly, as though a link had burst in the silently moving chain of events and swivelled out of its true position, jutting out of time, all the people and all the things grew rigid in the attitude of that moment, combining, squarely and solidly, to form another, abnormal order. Only she herself went sliding on, her swaying senses outspread among these faces and things — sliding downwards — away.

The whole complex pattern of her emotions, interwoven with the years of her life, was momentarily visible in the distance behind all this, isolated, dreary, and almost of no account. She thought: one digs a line in the ground, any unbroken line by which to keep one's bearings among the silent, towering things that tilt in all directions. That is our life. It's like talking on and on and deceiving oneself into believing that every word relates to the word before and demands the next, because one dreads to think how, if the thread broke, if words failed, one would sway and stagger and be swallowed up by the silence. But that's only weakness, only fear of the horribly gaping contingency of all one does...

« It's a matter of destiny, » he went on. « There are men whose destiny it is to bring unrest with them wherever they go, and it's no good barricading oneself in — there's no defence against it. » But she scarcely heard what this stranger said. Her thoughts were moving in queer, aloof, contradictory ways. She wanted to free herself with one single phrase, with one wild gesture, to take refuge at her beloved's feet: there was still time. But something restrained her, made her shrink from the mere thought of such screaming, panic-stricken flight. She did not want to turn from the great river's bank for fear of being swept away, to hug her life to herself for fear of losing it, to sing merely for fear of falling into bewildered silence. She rejected that. What she would have wished was to speak hesitantly, meditatively. Not to shriek, as all the others did for fear of the silence around them — nor to

sing either. Only a whispering, a falling silent... nothingness, the void...

And then there came a slow, soundless edging forward, a bending over the brink. « Don't you love the drama, the illusion of the stage? » she heard him say. « What I value in art is the subtlety of the right ending, which consoles us for the humdrum of everyday life. Life is disappointing, so often depriving us of the effect on which the curtain should fall. But if we were to leave it at that, wouldn't it mean accepting the bleak matter-of-factness of things? »

And suddenly she heard it quite distinctly, very close to her; somewhere there was still that other hand, that faint warmth reaching out for her, a conscious flash: You... And she yielded to it, borne up by an inner certainty that even now for each other they were all that counted, that they belonged together, wordless, incredulous, a fabric light and slight as the sweetness of death, an arabesque belonging to a style not yet evolved, each of them a note resounding meaningfully only in the other's soul and ceasing to exist when that soul no longer listened.

Her companion straightened up and looked at her. And then she realised she was here with him and how far from her was that other man, her beloved. What was he thinking now? Whatever it was, she had no way of knowing. And she herself? — hidden in the darkness of her body there was a swaying, aimless urge. At this moment she felt her body — that sheltering home and hedge around its own feelings — as a vague and formless obstacle. She recognised its independent existence and how its feelings and urges shut her in, closer than anything else — recognised in it the inevitable act of betrayal separating her from her beloved. And in a darkening of her senses such as she had never known before, she felt as if, suddenly, in some uncanny innermost depth, her body's last shred of faithfulness were turning into its opposite.

Perhaps it was only physical desire for her beloved, but her profound spiritual uncertainty now somehow made it

turn into desire for this stranger here with her. She faced the possibility that, even while she was being ravaged in her body, this body might still give her the sense of being herself, and she shuddered, as at a darkness, a void, into which she herself was being locked, at the body's autonomy and its mysterious power to disregard all decisions of the mind. And a blissful bitterness tempted her to disown, to abandon this body, to feel it in its sensual forlornness dragged down by a stranger and as though slashed open with knives, filled to the brim with the helpless twitchings of horror, violence, and disgust — and yet to feel queerly, and as in ultimate truthfulness and constancy, its presence round this nothingness, this wavering, shapeless omnipresence, this certainty of sickness that was the soul — feeling it in spite of everything as in a dream the edges of a wound are felt, striving in endlessly renewed, agonising endeavour to close, each torn part vainly searching for the other.

As a light rises behind a delicate network of veins, out of the expectant darkness of the years the mortal nostalgia of her love rose up among her thoughts, gradually enveiling her. And then all at once, from a long way off, from some radiant expanse, and as though she had only now understood the implication of the stranger's words, she heard herself say: « I don't know whether he could bear it... »

It was the first time she had spoken of her husband. She was startled: it did not seem part of this reality. But she instantly saw the meaning in the words she had just uttered, and their inevitable consequence. Seizing upon this, her companion said: « Do you mean to say you love him? » She did not miss the absurdity of the assurance with which he flung this at her. Trembling but determined, she said: « No, no, I don't love him at all. »

When she was upstairs again, in her room, she wondered how she could have uttered such a lie; but she relished the masked, enigmatic fascination of it. She thought of her husband; now and then in her mind's eye she caught a glimpse of him — it was like standing in the street, looking

through a window at someone moving about in a brightly lit room. Only then did she really grasp what she was doing. He seemed beautiful in that light and she wanted to be there with him, for then she too would partake of the radiance about him.

But she shrank back into her lie again, and once more it was like being outside in the street in darkness. She shivered with cold; it was anguish merely to be alive — anguish to look at things, to breathe. The feeling that bound her to her husband was like a globe of warm light into which she could easily slip back. There she was safe; there the things could not thrust at her like sharp ships' prows looming up out of the night; there everything was softly padded and warded off. And yet she refused that.

She remembered that she had lied once before. Not in her earlier life, for in that life there had been no lies: all that had happened then had simply been she herself. But once in this second life of hers she had told a lie, even though what she had said was true enough — that she had been out for a walk, in the evening, for two hours. Just as she had sat among the people downstairs tonight, so at that time she had walked about in the streets, forlorn, restless as a stray dog, and had gazed into the windows of the houses. And somewhere somebody opened his front door, letting a woman in, smugly satisfied with his own affability, his gestures, the style of his welcome; and somewhere else a man walked arm in arm with his wife, going out for the evening, filled with dignity from head to toe, smug in the security of wedlock; and everywhere, as in a broad river that placidly shelters multifarious life, there were small whirling eddies, each turning on its own centre, gazing inwards, blind and windowless, revolving in utter indifference. And within, in everyone, there was the same feeling of being held in balance by one's own echo in a narrow space that catches every word and keeps it ringing until the next is uttered, so that one does not hear the insufferable interval, the chasm between the impact of one action and the next, the chasm between two

sounds, where one drops away from the sense of one's own identity, plunging into the silence between two words, which might just as well be the silence between somebody else's words.

And then she had been assailed by the secret thought: somewhere among all these people there is someone — not the right one, someone else — but still, one could have adjusted oneself even to him, and then one would never have known anything of the person that one is today. For every feeling exists only in the long chain of other feelings, each supporting the other; and all that matters is that one instant of life should link up with the next without any lacuna, and there are hundreds of different ways in which it can do so. And for the first time since the beginning of her love the thought had flashed through her mind: it is all chance — by some chance something becomes reality, and then one holds on to it, that's all.

For the first time she had felt her being, down to its very foundations, as something indeterminate, had apprehended this ultimate featureless experience of herself in love as something that destroyed the very root, the absoluteness, of existence and would always have made her into a person that she called herself and who was nevertheless no different from everyone else. And it was as if she must let go, let herself sink back into the drift of things, into the realm of unfulfilled possibilities, the no-man's-land; and she hurried through the mournful, empty streets, glancing in through windows as she passed, wanting no other company than the clatter of her heels on the cobbles — reduced to that last sign of physical existence, hearing nothing but her own footsteps echoing now in front of her and now behind her.

At that time all she had been able to grasp was the dissolution, the ceaselessly shifting background of shadowy unrealised feelings that frustrated any power by which one might have held on to another — that, and the devalued, undemonstrable, and incomprehensible nature of her own life, and she had almost wept with confusion and fatigue,

entering that realm of utter isolation. But now, in this moment when it all came back to her, it carried her right to the end of whatever possibilities of real love, real union, there were in this transparently thin, glimmeringly vulnerable world of illusion — of illusions without which life could not be maintained: all the dream-dark straits of existing solely by virtue of another human being, all the island solitude of never daring to wake, this insubstantiality of love that was like a gliding between two mirrors behind which nothingness lay. And here in this room, hidden behind her false confession as behind a mask, and waiting for the adventure that she would experience as though she were someone else, she knew the wonderful, dangerous intensification of feeling that came with lying and cheating in love: she felt herself stealthily slipping out of her own being, out into some territory beyond anyone else's reach, the forbidden territory, the dissolution of absolute solitude — entering, for the sake of the greater truth, into the void that sometimes gapes for an instant behind all ideals.

And then suddenly she heard furtive footsteps, the creaking first of the stairs and then of the floorboards outside her door, a creaking under the weight of someone who had stopped there.

Her eyes turned towards the door. It seemed queer that there outside, behind those thin panels, there was another human being, standing motionless: and on each side of this indifferent, this accidental door tension rose high as behind a dam.

She had already undressed. Her clothes lay on the chair by the bed, where she had just flung them, and the vague scent of her body rose from them into the air of this impersonal, hired room, adding to it a touch of her own personality. She glanced round the room. She noticed a brass lock hanging loose, on a chest of drawers. Her gaze lingered on a small threadbare rug, worn thin by many footsteps, at the side of the bed. Suddenly she could not help thinking of all the bare feet that had stepped on this rug, permeating

it with their smell, and how this smell was given off again and entered into other people's souls, a familiar, protective smell, somehow associated with childhood and home. It was an odd, flickering, double impression, now strange and abhorrent, now irresistible, as if the self-love of all those strangers were a current flowing into her and all that was left of her own identity were a passive awareness of it. And all the while that man was there, standing on the other side of her door, his presence known to her only through the faint, hardly detectable sounds that he could not help making.

Now she was seized by a wild urge to throw herself down on this rug and kiss the repulsive traces of all those feet, exciting herself with their smell like a sniffing bitch. But this was no longer sexual desire; it was something entirely different, crying within her like a small child, howling like a high wind. Quickly she knelt down on the rug. The stiff flowers of the pattern loomed larger, spreading and intertwining senselessly before her eyes, and over them she saw her own thighs, the heavy thighs of a mature woman, towering incomprehensibly strange and ugly and yet tense as with a seriousness of their own; and her hands lay there before her on the floor, two animals with five-fold articulated bodies, staring at each other. All at once she remembered the lamp outside and the horribly silent moving circles it cast upon the ceiling, and the walls, the bare walls, remembered the emptiness out there and then again the man who stood there, faintly creaking sometimes as a tree creaks in its bark, his urgent blood in his head like the thicket of the leaves. And she herself was here on her hands and knees, naked, hidden only by a door; and she felt the full sweetness of her ripe body, felt it with that imperishable remnant of the soul that stands quietly, unmoved, beside the ravaged body even when it is broken apart and disfigured by the infliction of devastating injuries — that stands beside it, in grave and constant awareness and yet averted from it, as beside the body of a stricken beast.

Then she heard the man outside walking away with

furtive tread. And even through the turmoil in her rapt senses she realised: all this was betrayal itself, greater and weightier than the mere lie.

Slowly she began to rise on her knees, spellbound by the baffling thought that by now it might all have really happened, and she trembled like someone who has escaped from danger by mere chance, not by any effort of his own. She tried to picture it. She saw her body underneath that stranger's body, saw it with a lucidity that branched out into every smallest detail, like spilt water seeping into every cranny. She felt her own pallor and heard the shameful words of abandonment and saw above her the man's eyes, forcing her down, hovering over her, like the outspread wings of a bird of prey. And all the time she was thinking: This is betrayal! And now she pictured herself at home again after all this and how he would say: 'You're not here — I can't feel you...' And she had no answer but a helpless smile, a smile that tried to say: 'Believe me, it was nothing that can harm us...' And yet she felt one knee still pressed against the floor — a senseless, alien thing — and it brought her back to herself: how she was beyond recall, how this forlorn, defenceless frailty in even the most essential potentialities of human experience was something that no word could hold fast and no return could ever weave into the pattern of life as it once had been. She was empty of thought. She did not know if she was doing wrong. Everything turned into strange and lonely grief — and the grief itself was this room around her, enclosing a gentle darkness, a diffuse, floating room, softly rising in the air. And then gradually she perceived a strong, clear, indifferent light shining from below; and in it she saw everything she did, her own gestures of surrender, and the abandonment of her innermost being, torn out of her in ecstasy, all that in its enormity seemed so real and yet was mere appearance... There it lay, crumpled, small, and cold, all its relevance lost, far, far below her...

And after a long time it seemed to her as if a cautious hand were again trying the door, and she knew he was there

outside, listening intently. A whirling dizziness took hold of her, almost forcing her to creep to the door on all fours and draw back the bolt.

But she remained crouching on the floor in the middle of the room. Once again something held her back — a sense of her own sordidness, the atmosphere of the past. Like a single, violent thrust cutting her sinews, there was the thought that perhaps it was all nothing but a relapse into her past. She raised her hands above her head. 'Oh my beloved, help me, help me!' she cried out in her thoughts and felt the cry was true; and then it turned into a soft, receding thought: 'We moved towards each other, mysteriously drawn through space, through all the years... and now, by sad and hurtful ways, I enter into you.'

And then there was stillness, a great expanse: strength that had been painfully dammed up now pouring in through the breaches in the walls. Like a quiet, mirroring pool of water her life lay there before her, past and future united in the present moment. There are things one can never do — one does not know why. Perhaps those are the most important things? One knows they are the most important things. And one knows: a deadly languor lies upon life, one feels the stiffness and numbness as in frozen fingers. And sometimes again it loosens its hold, dissolves like snow and ice on meadows — one marvels, and is a sombre brightness expanding far, far away. But life, one's own hard and bony life, one's irrevocable life, resumes its ruthless grip — somewhere the links close — one does not do the things one ought to do.

Suddenly she rose to her feet, and the thought that now she *must* do this drove her soundlessly forward; her hands drew the bolt back. There was no sound. The door did not move. And then she opened the door and looked out into the passage: there was no one there. In the dim light from the lamp the bare walls stared at each other through empty space. He had gone without her hearing it.

She went to bed, her mind full of self-reproaches. And, already on the borders of sleep, she thought: 'I am hurting

you'. But at the same time she had the strange feeling: 'It is you who do whatever I am doing.' And sinking towards oblivion she knew: we are casting away everything that can be cast away, to hold on to each other all the more tightly, to wrap around us closely what no one can touch. Then for an instant, thrown up into wakefulness, she thought: 'This man will triumph over us. But what is triumph?' Sinking back into sleep, her thoughts slid down along that question into the depths and her bad conscience accompanied her like a last caress. A vast egoism, deepening and darkening the world, rose over her as over someone dying; behind closed eyes she saw bushes and clouds and birds, and she became quite small among them, and yet it all seemed to be there only for her sake. And then there was the moment of closing up, of shutting out everything alien; and on the threshold of dream there was perfection, a great and pure love mantling her in a trembling light, dissolution of all apparent contradictions.

The intruder did not return. She slept undisturbed, her door unlatched — quiet as a tree on a meadow.

With the next morning a mild, mysterious day began. She woke as though behind bright curtains keeping out all the reality of the light outside. She went for a walk; and he accompanied her. Her mind swayed with an intoxication that came from the blueness of the air and the whiteness of the snow. They walked to the edge of the little town, and there the white plain before them lay radiant and festive.

They stood by a fence and looked at a small path behind it. A peasant woman was throwing corn to her hens. A patch of lichen shone yellow in the wintry light. « Do you think —? » Claudine asked, gazing back through the street and up into the pale blue air; but she did not finish her sentence. After a while she said: « Look at that wreath — I wonder how long it's been hanging there? Does the air feel

it? Is it alive? » That was all she said and she did not even know why she said that. He smiled.

She stood beside him, and it was as if everything were engraved in metal, still trembling from the pressure of the engraver's burin. And while she felt him looking at her, observing her, something within her fell into shape and lay wide and brilliant as fields lie one next to the other under the eyes of a circling bird.

This life, now bright blue, now dark — somewhere a small bright patch of yellow — what is the meaning of it? This voice calling to the hens, this faint pattern of the strewn grains of corn, and then all at once something that strikes across it all like the tolling of a bell on the hour — what does it say, and to whom? This thing without a name, eating its way down into the depths and only sometimes shooting up through the narrow slit of seconds and flashing through some passer-by and at other times lying as though dead — what can it mean? She looked around with quiet eyes and felt all the things about her without thinking of them, felt them as one feels the touch of hands laid on one's forehead when there is nothing more to say.

And after that she listened merely with a smile to all he said. He obviously felt he was drawing his net tighter round her, and she let him have his way. While he talked to her she felt no more than one feels when walking between houses, hearing people talk indoors. The pattern of her thoughts was sometimes invaded by another current, which drew her thoughts along with it, now this way, now that; and she would follow of her own free will — then for a short time, half emerging from shadowy depths, would almost return to herself, and once again would follow, would sink. Softly and silently the entangling flow of it took her captive.

And in between she felt this man's love of himself as intensely as if it were a feeling of her own. His tenderness towards himself infected her with a faint sensual excitement. It was like entering a realm where everything was hushed, and silent decisions prevailed, decisions not of one's own

making. She knew herself hard pressed and knew herself to be giving way, but it no longer mattered. Something far within her was like a bird upon a branch, singing...

She ate a light supper and went to bed early. There was a deadness in things now; she no longer felt any erotic excitement. Yet after a short sleep she woke, thinking: 'He's downstairs, waiting.' She groped for her clothes and dressed, simply got up and dressed — without feeling, without thought, with only a remote awareness of doing wrong; and then perhaps, at the very last moment, there was a sense of being exposed and defenceless. And so she went downstairs.

The room was deserted. The tables and chairs were tense and still, looming indistinctly in the silence of the night. In one corner, there he sat.

She said something, without quite knowing what — perhaps: « I was feeling so alone there upstairs... » And she knew just how he was bound to misinterpret it. After a while he took her hand. She rose, hesitated, and then ran out of the room. She knew this was behaving like any silly little woman, and there was a thrill in that. On the stairs she heard footsteps behind her. The stairs creaked. Her thoughts were suddenly very remote and abstract, but her body was trembling like an animal hunted down, deep in the forest.

Later, sitting in her room, he said: « You are in love with me, aren't you? I grant you, I'm no artist or philosopher, I'm just human — but a real man, yes, I think I may say, a real man. » « What is a *real man*? » she asked. « What a queer question! » he exclaimed irritably. « No, that's not what I mean, » she said. « I'm thinking how odd it is that one can be fond of someone just because one is fond of him — fond of his eyes, his tongue — not his words, but the sound of them... »

He kissed her and said: « So that is how you love me? »

Claudine found the strength to answer: « No, what I love is being with you — the fact, the mere chance, of being with you. One might equally well be among the Eskimos, wearing trousers made of skins, and have drooping breasts. And be

delighted with it all. Can't there, after all, be other kinds of *real* people? »

But he said: « You're mistaken. You are in love with me. Only you can't face it yet. And just that is the sign of true passion. »

Involuntarily something in her shrank when she realised how he was assuming possession of her. But he murmured: « No, don't say anything. »

Claudine was silent. But while they were undressing, she began to talk — again out-of-place, aimless, even senseless talk, merely like a disconsolate movement of her hands, an urge to stroke and smooth away, a sort of by-play... « It's like slipping through a narrow pass — suddenly everything's changed. Animals, people, flowers, oneself — it's all quite different. You wonder: if I'd always lived here, how would I think about this, how would I feel about that? Isn't it odd that there's only a line — only one line one has to cross? I should like to kiss you and then jump back across that line and look from over there. And then jump back to you, time and again. And each time, crossing the frontier, surely I'd feel it more and more distinctly. I should grow paler all the time, people would die — no, not die, shrink, shrivel up... And so would the trees and animals. And in the end there'd be nothing left but faint, faint smoke... and then only a tune... floating through the air... over a void... »

And all at once she said: « Go away. Please... It sickens me. »

But he only smiled.

And then she felt in horror how, in spite of everything, her body was swelling up with lust. Yet at the back of her mind there was a shadowy memory of something she had once experienced on a day in spring: a state that was like giving herself to everyone and yet belonging only to the one beloved...

And far, far off — as children say of God: He is great — she saw and knew the image of her love.

(Translated by Eithne Wilkins and Ernst Kaiser).

HANS ANDREUS

ELEVEN POEMS

THE HOURS

The quiet sun sent us the hours
of the late afternoon
and they are virgins with cool consoling hands.
But what do they know? what do they understand?
Are they not dead, sterile?
And does not man (the mortal)
with one ear pressed upon the earth
listen to the underground voices of the earth?
And with one ear near the sky
listen to the high voices of the sky?

FACES

For a life I give almost everything:
all my faces are different faces of a fire.
The oldest one hiding its secret,
the silent one hinting at the wisdom
of gods, animals, trees —

and the youngest, the restless one,
longing for its visions.

MOUNTAINEERING

A mountain; the day was a mountain.
A glacier too: with ice-axes I climbed.
Arrived at the summit, I commemorated my dead friends
and some weeping women —
and I raised the flag of my kingdom:
the flag with the child and the mask.

There was silence,
till suddenly the silence broke.
For shouts from far below
reached me, shouts and shrieks:
« Are you not everything we are? »

Later, before nightfall,
I made my camp — slept long
and didn't know the wind which destroyed me
and not the snow which buried me
and never knew that I was
a dead man dead of the cold of the mountains.

When I awoke, slowly
I climbed down and went again into the world.
But what could I give? Nothing
but my knowledge. — And who takes it?
Nothing but my love. — And who loves it?
Nothing but my life. — And who lives it?

And who amongst the impoverished tells me:
only a voice — that is a glass of wine;
only a voice, a voice out of madness,
is something divine, can change us, make us glad?

YOUTH

Wine-stained; can I say this of children,
boys desiring, virgins yielding?
Sinful and passionate, life was a sun exploding.
It was dreamy, sombre, strong.

Disdainfully measuring the words of the knowing,
trying to go where no one did go,
did I live like this, among schoolboys like cattle,
the locksmiths of the years to come?

I lived in window-panes, mounted birds.
I sailed three boats (she was to die young.)
Loneliness, consciousness drove me further:
I sought the air, found an underworld of ice.

WISDOM, ANCIENT AND NEW

Earth is not earth, wind is not wind, flower is not flower.
I cut a flower — I give beauty and die;
I hunt the wind — I am hunted all over the earth.
I stop the earth — and I draw my ellipses in space.

Thinking, — I thought man was made out of
three parts of death and three parts of immortality.
I can learn to cause life and death from afar.

I do not give laughter and hardly joy
to these high sciences. For when I am
that which I know but live on with my blindness,
I touch fire. And can be warmth.

TRAVELLING

Starting from the sea,
travelling into the inland.

The sun is my bearer,
walks behind me with the lightest
burden of light,
whilst I keep within the laws
of the roads or follow
an illegal footpath.

Valleys. Towns. Rivers.

I pass the night lodging in
a gesture or a smile
and from a woman, proud yet tender,
I have known my little death.
I keep her profile: a precious
ruby, warm and severe.

Sometimes my silence approaches me:
I last the time of a horizon.

COUNTRYSIDE

The houses pick like hens in the landscape,
green of poor woods and green of descending fields.
A church stands like a nine year-old and curly child;
blue careless smoke drifts somewhere slowly upwards;
sun and moon stand white and palewhite in the same low sky.

I want to play on the telegraph lines;
I want to set free seahorses;

they are so earnest and so beautiful, they are not aware that
one smiles;
I'm as far away as the word Dodecanese.

I'm as afraid as the last leaf of a tree in winter:
it became so thin that one sees but the nervation,
it lost faith in birds.

I remember:

I rounded your breasts,
prolonged your thighs, bound your feet japanese,
smoothed your shoulders, lighted your eyes
and sang your mouth to you.

But I'm no longer here; I am
further away than earth and skies.

ITALY IN A LIGHT MANNER

Sometimes I make music which is too light for heavy minds,
am a white raven of gaiety;
I beg your pardon.

I think to love is:
the little black bullets: the bitter olives of the olive-tree
and the wine bardolino
and at noon
the siesta,
in all houses tito schipa singing,
in the cream red pink etc. houses,
with thousand shutters of green.

I think to love is a ritornello,
ten Togliattis of dogmatism
and the battles of Garibaldi.

The bats in the night through the streets
of the women-village, — the men fishing;
and the harbour immobilized under the light
*of the sun (*and *the white wings of the mother-church) —*
and Leoncavallo a locomotivo
said the man who took the guitar from the wall.

Shall I tinkle like an iron ring upon the green glass of a bottle
on a floating piece of cork:
here lie the fishermen's nets?

I am:

a seafaring man,
a horoscope of superstitiousness
and a meal of salt fish and wine.

You? a quintillion.
You shoot the sun.
You have hands of burning sand grains
and fingers soft-skinned like small small sharks.

I think to love is:
a dance of mountains,
a fruit
and a kernel.

ESPERANTO

I speak the world language
and the round language of the earth
and the sun and moon language
and the language of the living.

I study chiromancy
and I worship stars;
I make gold out of bricks
and I explain dreams the inverted way.

I hew sculptures in marble
and I kindle red fire;
I breathe music
and I draw on fine oiled paper.

Nothing nothing is enough:
the words break like waves
on your primitive mouth
and eyes of the inside of earth.

But it is everything I have
but for my skin and my hands,
but for the blindness of my lips,
but for the spaces of my eyes.

And I ask you now listen
like you stand still and listen to the birds,
like you stand still and look at the sun,
like you caress a bird.

For somewhere you are to be found
in the mystery of words,
in the wondering of words,
in the world of language.

I speak the world language
and the round language of the earth
and the sun and moon language
and the language of the living.

SYMPOSIUM

The day fills jars with perfume,
cups with wine: multiple
the gifts of the immortals.
O give me a coloured temple
to bring offerings in to splendid
priestesses, blueblack their hair — their eyes
small openings among the grass:
one looks at golden scarabs.

And I will take the hours
and change them into stringéd
instruments — but not play upon them.
They will serve for my quests: friends, passers-by,
all equally welcomed by
girls like brooks
and hills like sages.

And night is welcome too:
the course of time make no change,
while I listen to these hours
played upon by friend or strangers.

A FRIEND

Friend I speak to,
with whom I hold long conversations
under the hungry lamplight
or outside — leaning against a stone
or sitting in the grass,

whose words are calm as air,
but who makes me also say:

« I am a room full of danger;
ghosts surround me more dreadful than ghosts,
for every one of them
a falsification of my resemblance, »

— speak: how many hours yet
shall I wake through? How many
are there for me to rest?
or how few?

Speak — no, don't speak, don't
show me the hours, the shadows,
the shadows of my nights,
my nights or even my days.

THEODORE ROETHKE

THE OTHER

What is she, while I live? —
Who plagues me with her shape,
Lifting a nether Lip
Lightly: so buds unleave;
But if I move too close,
Who busks me on the Nose?

Is she what I become?
Is this my final Face?
I find her every place;
She happens, time on time —
My Nose feels for my Toe;
Nature's too much to know.

Who can surprise a thing
Or come to love alone?
A lazy natural man,
I loll, I loll, all Tongue.
She moves, and I adore:
Motion can do no more.

A child stares past a fire
With the same absent gaze;
I know her careless ways:
Desire hides from desire.
Aging, I sometimes weep,
Yet still laugh in my sleep.

BABETTE DEUTSCH

THE MOORS

They have giant
Knees; rough treasure
Spills over them.
No stone precious, but every blade and button
On fire with life: even the quakerish beads of bayberry,
And elderberry, darker than amethyst, holding,
Like hills at evening, dark in their winy grains.
And in pine plumes, wild grapevine, beachgrass, reaching
stems — greens,
Various: jades, turquoise, the more sombre emeralds,
The green dozing in jasper.
As for hips of roses, there is coral, rosered, bloodred,
Prodigal as split pomegranates.
Of these live jewels, falling down and down,
There are none
At the cliff's foot.
Sand, bare even of a weedy bracelet, stretches
To receive the sea,
That comes slowly,
That comes powerfully,
With no gift but an embrace, where
Other riches drown.

W. S. MERWIN

THE FISH HAWK

Only if I could be shorn of all features
Might the great bird recognize me, if he should return.
Seventeen years now since without warning
He hung there in the early sunlight
A timeless instant. Seventeen years of time
The bones have come through, signing my face,
Giving warrant for what I am and cannot deny.
They were putting potatoes in the sloped field: it
Shone, and they moved and talked there as through glass.
The smell of wood smoke still haunted from breakfast.
Below the field the clear stream running in shadow
Made a sound more cold and secret than anyone knew.
The day was warm first inside my jacket
But my hands for a long time still felt the night-cold
Which all at once, there in the dazzling morning,
Seemed to reclaim me entire, like a flood. I remember
The shadow coming over the short grass, curved
Like a gust, but not for that I looked up.
He was swinging above me, slow and not high: white
Wings with their black bars, the great fish hawk.
What was he doing so far inland, the sea
Still in his eyes? I floated there in his
Burning gaze, my head jerked back and the breath

Choked in my open mouth as though I were drowning.
I knew him for what he was, the barred
Marauder preying far from his haunts, and my eyes
Cried up that he should know me in that
Wide water, should be aware of what
I was, that I could not somehow assemble a word for.
He had almost come to me, almost
Snatched me out of the flat sea with his eyes,
But a gun thumped in the swamp, and without
Haste wheeling he was already
As far as the mountains before even the echo came.
Now the bones have come through, with the auspices
Of these seventeen years since, to portray what I am,
Yet only if I could be shorn of their features
Might I know myself recognized and named
In the eyes of the great fish hawk, if he should return.

THE BONES

It takes a long time to hear what the sands
Seem to be saying, with the wind nudging them,
And then you cannot put it in words nor tell
Why these things should have a voice. All kinds
Of objects come in over the tide-wastes
In the course of a year, with a throaty
Rattle: weeds, drift-wood, the bodies of birds
And of fish, shells. For years I had hardly
Considered shells as being bones, maybe
Because of the sound they could still make, though
I knew a man once who could raise a kind
Of wailing tune out of a flute he had,
Made from a fibula: it was much the same
Register as the shells'; the tune did not

Go on when his breath stopped, though you thought it would.
Then that morning, coming on the wreck,
I saw the kinship. No recent disaster
But an old ghost from under a green buoy,
Brought in by the last storm, or one from-which
The big wind had peeled back the sand grave
To show what was still left: the bleached, chewed-off
Timbers like the ribs of a man or the jaw-bone
Of some extinct beast. Far down the sands its
Broken cage leaned out, casting no shadow
In the veiled light. There was a man sitting beside it
Eating out of a paper, littering the beach
With the bones of a few more fish, while the hulk
Cupped its empty hand high over him. Only he
And I had come to those sands knowing
That they were there. The rest was bones, whatever
Tunes they made. The bones of things; and of men too
And of man's endeavors whose ribs he had set
Between himself and the shapeless tides. Then
I saw how the sand was shifting like water,
That once could walk. Shells were to shut out the sea,
The bones of birds were built for floating
On air and water, and those of fish were devised
For their feeding-depths, while a man's bones were framed
For what? For knowing the sands are here,
And coming to hear them a long time, for giving
Shapes to the sprawled sea, weight to its winds, and
Wrecks to plead for its sands. These things are not
Limitless: we know there is somewhere
An end to them, though every way you look
They extend further than a man can see.

NORRIS LLOYD

DEAR SISTERS

Dear Mary, Anna, Lizzie, Agnes, Anna, Kate, and Jane. (Mary in Ireland, Anna in Heaven, Lizzie in New York, Agnes in New York, Anna where, Kate and Jane, oh where?) I, Patrick Malachy take my pen in hand...

Mr. Malachy was frying today's egg in yesterday's frying pan and he could smell the coffee beginning to boil when the stiffness in his neck and head seemed to go away and he started the letter to his sisters. When he awakened that morning he thought, « Ah, God, » but after he located a finger of corn liquor in the vinegar bottle under his bed, he felt better. He started his breakfast and started a letter to his sisters, something he did often now that Miss Sallie Mae was not with him. So far he had only written the letter in his head, and the stilted phrases of letter writing, when he was a schoolboy back in Ireland, floated to the surface. Once he had bought a tablet of lined paper at Mrs. Rockmore's store, but when he sat down with it he could not find a pen, and the ink was thick in the bottom of the pot.

He slid his egg onto a plate, swished clean by bread at last night's supper. He would have to wash dishes soon, he thought, as he doused the bread into the yolk of the egg, but right now he would think about the letter to his sisters and then he would have to do a little work on Miss Genie Cantwell's white pumps. She said she must have them for Sunday.

Dear sisters, I take my pen in hand to tell you I am in a place called Greenwood.

Why he was in a place called Greenwood was so mysterious to him that trying to explain it to his sisters always stopped him from actually taking his pen in hand and putting the words down.

It happened this way. Mr. Malachy woke one morning in Atlanta in the little back room of his shoe shop. He was not in his bed, and, for some reason, he was surrounded by shoes, lefts, rights, whites, blacks, patents, suedes, lace-up, button. He sat still wondering why he was there and why the shoes had moved back from their place in the front shop, feeling strangely that they had walked in and settled themselves around him just to cause confusion.

He began sorting the shoes and placing them in neat rows when he had a prickly feeling along his neck, a feeling he was being watched. He cut his eye around toward the little bed and a man sat there watching him. Who was he? Was he someone he had seen in a crowd, or someone he had dreamed about? Finally the man stood up shakily, sat down again quickly, and said,

« We've sinned, brother. »

Mr. Malachy said nothing. His stomach seemed to revolve in a sudden wide arc, but he focused his eyes on the shoes and sternly tried to steady his stomach.

« What would my poor white-haired mother think of me? » moaned the man, rocking back and forth on the bed. Then he stopped and fixed his gaze on Mr. Malachy. « What would your mother think of you? »

Mr. Malachy dropped the patent leather shoes he was holding and crossed himself, but did not answer. He was concentrating powerfully on his stomach. He closed his eyes for a minute to try to stop the room revolving. Then he opened them quickly. The man came over and put his arm around his shoulders. « Brother, are you saved? » he asked.

Mr. Malachy gave up the struggle and rushed for the

toilet. When he came back, able to see more clearly, the man was sitting in his place sorting shoes.

« And who may ye be? » Mr. Malachy asked him.

« I am Mr. Pink Millwee, and I have come to save you, » and Mr. Pink Millwee scrambled to his knees there among the shoes, and, sobbing or at times smiling like an angel, pleaded with the Almighty to save this poor misguided sinner who had never had the opportunity to know the true religion, who had been misled by priests, put upon by nuns, and never known the true Scripture.

Mr. Pink Millwee finished and straightened up on his knees. Mr. Malachy crossed himself as Mr. Pink moved over to the bed on his hands and knees and groped for a bottle. When he had found it and finished off the swallow or two left, he pleaded with Mr. Malachy to leave his wicked past and return to Greenwood with him where his old white-haired mother would welcome him into the fold.

Mr. Malachy said he did not mind. He had moved many times before. His progress down the map from the port of New York had taken some ten years or so since he had gotten drunk there in 1908 and the ship had sailed without him. He found it easy to slide along from one town to another. He felt at home in the south. Happenings had time to gather meaning before something else pushed through to be explained. But this move from Atlanta to Greenwood was one move he could not explain. Mr. Pink Millwee thought he was saving him, of course. Anyhow, here he was in Greenwood with a lifetime to figure out why.

His sisters would want to know about Greenwood. (*Mary in Ireland, Anna in Heaven, Lizzie in New York, Agnes in New York, Anna, where, Kate and Jane, oh where?*) They would have no way of knowing about these little southern towns.

The town of Greenwood was a row of stores with iron awnings extending over the rough brick sidewalk. The stores, with everything from fat side-meat to shoe strings, reminded him of the crowded little stores in Ireland. There were tired

looking men sitting around the pot-bellied stoves reading the *Macon Daily Telegraph.* One of them could have been Patrick McGarrity from Kerry, his Adam's apple prominent in his scrawny neck, as he drawled out, « And what might I do for you today, Mr. Malachy? »

Macon was the nearest town where shoes could be repaired, but it was twenty-five miles away, so Mr. Pink suggested that Mr. Malachy should stay on in Greenwood and start a shoe repair shop. Mr. Malachy could see that he would not make much of a living. He had already looked over the shoes in town. The ladies flopped around in some cheap things they would not have repaired anyhow and saved their good shoes for Sunday. The Negroes often did not wear shoes at all, and if they did, they carved holes in them for their toes to spread. His biggest business would be with the children in winter and with the saw mill hands. It would be cheap to live in Greenwood, of course, and though he could not quite understand why, he wanted to stay for a while.

Mr. Pink took him over to Old Man Witherspoon's livery stable and he found a small room that had once been used for a harness room. It had two windows looking out on a path leading to the horse lot and a door opening on the path. He found a room to sleep in up over Mrs. Rockmore's store and did his own cooking on the little wood stove at the end of his shop. Mr. Pink staked him to the few tools needed for the shop, but that outlay was not much since Mr. Malachy had been an apprentice in the days when cobbling was a hand trade. Only, later, in the cities he had learned to use the machines.

Dear Sisters, remember the stories Mary and Anna used to tell as we gathered around the hearth or when we would lie in a little circle we pressed down in the tall grass...

When Mr. Malachy came to this point in his letter he would stop to think of those stories told by his two older sisters as they huddled together at night often unable to sleep because of the thinness of the soup. Try as hard as he might he could not recall how his sisters looked, not even the older

ones. After all, the younger ones were weazened small girls hanging to the skirts of the older ones. But he could remember, as though he had just scrambled to his feet from the sunny turf, the story of the Banshee and Jimmy O'Grady, the Ghost of Halloran's Castle, and the Haunted Fisherman. His sisters could tell one story after another and never pause for breath, and the flesh along his spine would feel cold and prickly, and he would turn his head suddenly to catch the ghosts out of the corner of his eye. There had been a time when he could only go to sleep between his two older sisters and they would comfort him one minute and frighten him out of his wits the next.

How long had it taken him to learn that his sisters knew only three or four stories and had rung changes upon them, switched characters and settings, so that each story seemed to spring fresh and true from its creator's mouth? Later, he had thought of these stories as he lay back on a deck while the boat creaked over a hot sea; or more recently in the years of his trek southward as he sat at his cobbler's bench, he saw the stories fall into a pattern.

Now he had a tale to tell about himself, the equal in strangeness and sadness of any his sisters had ever told. He would skip those long days of his apprenticeship to a shoemaker in Dublin to stretch the potatoes at home, and the years he was a sailor on a British boat. These were calm and quiet happenings that might have come to any lad in Glengariff.

The real story began (*oh sisters*) from the time he rented the harness room in Old Man Witherspoon's livery stable and set up the shoe shop. Every morning he walked down the little path at the side of the livery stable to his entrance toward the rear. There was a wooden bench set up against the gray weathered boards of the stable, and in the early morning when he came from his room he had to pass Old Man Witherspoon and his wife, Miss Sallie Mae. The first morning Old Man Witherspoon had said, « Good morning, Mr. Malachy, how's your corporosity segashuating this morning? » and when

Mr. Malachy looked surprised Old Man Witherspoon slapped his frail flanks and whinnied like one of his horses. Since the joke had worked so well the first morning, he had continued to use it every morning afterwards. Mr. Malachy just grinned now and bowed a little to Miss Sallie Mae who sat with her arms folded across her thin bosom, looking at some distant object, her large gray eyes merely flickering with recognition as he passed. Mr. Malachy would go on back to his shop each morning and prepare a little breakfast. Then he started work on his shoes. Old Man Witherspoon would stir around and draw water to fill a trough near the well. From there the water ran through a pipe to another trough in the lot where the three horses, stock in trade of the livery stable, swished their tails and hunched their shoulders to fight off the flies. Old Man Witherspoon would fuss over Daisy, a pretty chestnut mare, and rub her and talk to her in a low voice. Daisy's coat was always shining, and the gleaming white hide, like socks, on her delicate legs, made her look fastidious. Miss Sallie Mae looked after the two sway-backed plow horses, Jock and Adam. When Old Man Witherspoon was there she never touched Daisy.

During the spring or fall Old Man Witherspoon had frequent calls for the two plow horses from Negroes with a little plot of ground or from townspeople plowing up their gardens for turnip greens or collards. Sometimes in the summer, Old Man Witherspoon would hitch Daisy to a light buggy and drive a fisherman down from Macon out to Logan's Pond. Now and then a sporting hunter would take Daisy, shining and saddled, on a run into the country where she would be staked out while he pursued the partridges or doves. On most days Old Man Witherspoon and Miss Sallie Mae would just come down and do their chores, and Old Man Witherspoon would lead Daisy back up the village street to his house with Miss Sallie Mae following along behind. In the late afternoon the two would return, feed and water the horses, fuss over Daisy, and then go home. Sometimes the Old Man would saddle up Daisy and climb stiffly on her back

for the homeward trip. He was handsome and dignified, like the figure on the monument in front of the courthouse, with his flowing beard and straight back above his beautiful horse. Mr. Malachy was not surprised one day to find that the name of General James Wardlow Witherspoon, Old Man Witherspoon's father, led all the rest on the court-house monument.

Old Man Witherspoon would come and lean through the open window of the shop sometimes and tell Mr. Malachy about his younger days, the stables of horses his family had kept, all like Daisy, and the big house with white pillars he had lived in until he was a young man. When Mr. Malachy offered him a cold drink on a warm day, Old Man Witherspoon was very polite and mannerly and bowed slightly from the waist and said, « After you, suh, after you. » But Mr. Malachy never heard him utter so much as a word of thanks when Miss Sallie Mae drew up a bucket of cold water from the well and brought a drink to him.

One day in early summer Old Man Witherspoon went off with his fisherman. Miss Sallie Mae came back in the afternoon and watered the two plow horses and sat on the bench. Mr. Malachy was tired and cramped and he got up and stretched and went to the door and stood looking at the sunset. A bird cried in the chinaberry trees across the horse lot. The sunset made the little town glow, pearly, smoky, still. Mr. Malachy said, « Aye, and it reminds me of India. »

Miss Sallie Mae looked at him surprised. « You been to that far-off place? »

« Aye, that and many others, » he said, « I can't name you all the places I been, India, South Africa, Suez Canal, Madagascar, — » He dreamed along on a voyage and stopped.

« Name me some more, » she said.

« Oh, there be Mauritius, Cyprus. »

« Where's that? »

« That's another far-off place, an island — »

Mr. Malachy turned to look at her now and he saw the same Miss Sallie Mae he had seen for the last months, a pale thin woman, with coarse brown hair cut short over her head,

and making duck tails on the neck, like a little boy's head long in need of a haircut. Now the glow from the sunset caught her face and softened it. She turned towards him, and he saw those great deepset gray eyes that had never shown more than a flicker of recognition as he passed.

« Don't the folks back there in that place, India, bow down to graven images? » she asked.

« Sure, » he said, « and queer ones, too. I was a young chap off a British boat and one day we rowed over to an island and saw their temples. It was a day like this, » he said.

« I never did see a man who's been so far away, » she said. « Maybe you're the only man in this county, maybe you're the only man in the whole state of Georgia been to all them places. »

« May be, » he answered her.

Daisy was turning into the stable. Miss Sallie Mae did not move. She sat on while the fisherman climbed out and Old Man Witherspoon backed stiffly down from the buggy. He called to her to come help unharness Daisy.

One more time that summer Mr. Malachy spoke to Miss Sallie Mae, more than his good morning, Miss Sallie Mae, or good evening. When Old Man Witherspoon went on another trip to Logan's Pond she called to him from the bench, « Name me some more places you've been to. »

He stood in the doorway again. « Well, now, I been to China once and Japan, and Singapore, and Java, and Sydney, that's in Australia. »

« Sydney, that's in Australia, » she repeated. She turned and looked at him, her eyes wide with wonder, « Tell me about your home? »

« What should I be telling you? » he said, « What it looks like there? What the people are like and what they do? »

« Tell me everything, » she answered.

« Well, sure, the little town I lived near was even smaller than Greenwood, but some of the people are like the people here. The hills are very green, bright green, deeper than the

green you have here in spring. And I have seven sisters, Mary, Anna, Lizzie, Agnes, Anna, Kate, and Jane. »

« Where are they now? » she asked.

« Mary is in Ireland. Anna died when she was ten and I was eight. The next was Lizzie. She came to New York. The other four girls were just little ones when I left home, but Mary wrote me once that Agnes had come to Lizzie in New York. The second Anna, where is she? Kate and Jane, I don't know where. »

Speaking and thinking of Mary and the first Anna made him feel a warmth of belonging to someone that he did not often feel unless he had had a drink of corn liquor. He lingered in the doorway after Miss Sallie Mae seemed to lose interest and sat withdrawn without asking more questions. He searched for something to draw her interest back.

« Mary and Anna, ah me, » he said, « what stories they used to tell. Wherever did they learn them all? Sure my mother told them strange things she heard as she went peddling over the countryside, but never so many as they knew. » He paused again and thought of the wonder of those endless stories.

Miss Sallie Mae looked at him again, her gray eyes luminous in her pale face. « What kind of stories? »

« Oh, stories of banshees, ghosts, animals that were bewitched. Irish stories. I never hear such stories except from another Irishman or sometimes a Greek. »

« I've heard tell of banshees. Just heard colored folks talk of them. They say they hear them sometimes, screaming, » she said. « It's a bad sign. »

When she came back in the afternoon and sat in her regular place, he stood in the door and told her the story of the cow that was bewitched. When he finished, she said, « That Daisy. She's bewitched, I do declare. »

Mr. Malachy did not know what to say. He had told her a story of Ireland, how true he would not care to say. Most people nowadays would say it was just a story. But when he was young, he had believed it. He had told her the story to

keep her speaking to him with no thought she would find a counterpart in her life.

She went on. « *He* bewitched her. I hate that horse and she hates me. » She stopped. Daisy, calm and unbewitched, was walking sedately toward the stable, pulling the light buggy. Mr. Malachy returned to his bench.

Weeks passed and he had no more talk with Miss Sallie Mae. But now she came into his thoughts. He found most of his customers ready to tell long-winded stories about so and so in town, and Mr. Pink Millwee was always happy to talk. He still spoke frequently to Mr. Malachy about his soul's salvation, but once he had put in his plug for Jesus, he seemed willing to go on to other subjects. Still Mr. Malachy could not quite bring himself to ask outright about Miss Sallie Mae. He waited.

One Sunday afternoon Mr. Malachy and Mr. Pink walked up the street toward the Baptist Church. Mr. Pink pointed out the small unpainted frame cottage where Old Man Witherspoon lived with Miss Sallie Mae. It had a neat, hard-swept yard, with fruit trees growing down one side, each surrounded by its own little fence, and the whole yard protected by a tight chicken wire fence topped with two rows of barbed wire. Daisy was looking out of the half-door of a small shed in the back of the yard.

Mr. Pink Millwee said, « I never could figure out whether he put up a mean-looking fence like that to keep folks out or to keep Daisy in. Well, I'm happy to see he's at least stabling her back on Sunday. Every other day he stakes her out on the church lawn. Course she helps cut the grass, but it ain't so nice for the ladies with their Sunday shoes on. And sometimes she pulls up the stakes and walks over the gravestones. People get mad about that. But Old Man Witherspoon thinks there's no place too good for Daisy. Sometimes I reckon we'll hear he's keeping her in the house with him and Miss Sallie Mae. »

They walked on through the cemetery in back of the church and Mr. Pink pointed out a short cut for Mr. Malachy

to take to a Negro house on the other side of the woods where he might find a new source of corn liquor. Mr. Pink had to stay at the church to get out the hymn books and arrange the chairs for the Junior B.Y.P.U. meeting.

Coming back past the church after dark Mr. Malachy found Mr. Pink sitting on the church steps. They walked back to the shop and opened it and Mr. Malachy sat on his stool and Mr. Pink sat on one end of the work bench. They passed the bottle back and forth in the moonlight.

« You know, you're right unaccommodating, Mr. Malachy, » said Mr. Pink Millwee. « Why don't you give in and get saved? Join up with us, brother, and you'll find new meaning in you life. Next month Brother Langston will start revival meetings and I'd feel mighty proud to see you coming in and giving yourself to Jesus. »

The moonlight fell on a dish of shoe buttons which gleamed like little black eyes in the darkness. « I was a low sinner, » said Mr. Pink, « Now I'm on the glory trail. Almost going to be a deacon. If I could bring more souls to Jesus I could be a deacon. »

Mr. Malachy was silent. He would like to please Mr. Pink. But he did not want to give his soul to anyone. Mr. Pink started singing, but quietly, gently, *Love Lifted Me.*

« Maybe we ought to hire Old Man Witherspoon's buggy and Daisy and take a little trip down in the Flatwoods. Real nice sanctified people down there. »

« Where did Old Man Witherspoon get Daisy? » asked Mr. Malachy, cautiously.

« Well, now, I reckon Old Man Witherspoon always had Daisy. He had her mother before her and her mother before her, I reckon. I hear tell that the Old Man always kept one real pretty horse ever since the day when his family kept a barn-full of them. He lost everthing else, a big white house out in the country, a big white house with magnolia trees right up to the front door. I seen it once. It had a little white building off to one side. Folks said it was a dovecote. Old Man Witherspoon must have cut quite a figure in them days.

But he lost it all, buying fancy horses, betting. He never paid no mind to his farming. Some folks say he threw it away on women, too. »

He stopped and broke again into the hymn with the refrain *Love Lifted Me.* « Now take Miss Sallie Mae, she's just common white trash from the Flatwoods. Buckra. Though her pappy was Henry Cartledge. You've seen him maybe. Cartledges got a big name around this county, but I reckon Old Henry is a reprobate. Brother Lanston says to me that many's the sermon he's prepared just to save Henry Cartledge. The trouble is getting him in there to hear it. »

Mr. Pink stopped again. Mr. Malachy willed him to go on, but Mr. Pink must have been thinking of Henry Cartledge and his sins because he muttered, « most miserable sinner in Greenwood. »

Mr. Malachy said carefully, « You say Miss Sallie Mae came from down in the Flatwoods? »

« Yessir, Flatwoods. That's where I was thinking we might take a little trip some Sunday. Some folks say the Flatwoods is just full of ignorant, lawless country people, but I found it real sanctified. They're Primitive Baptists down in there, you know. Believe in foot-washing and that kind of thing, and I mean when they feel the spirit they just get right up and shout. The gals just love everybody oncet they get going. »

Mr. Malachy took another sip from the bottle while he tried to frame another question, but Mr. Pink went on. « Let's see now. Well, Mr. Henry Cartledge took advantage of some pore ignorant gal down there in the Flatwoods and she had this baby, name of Sallie Mae. Mr. Henry left her down there for a while with her mother. Then I reckon he got to thinking how that baby was half-Cartledge and all and how it was unbecoming of a Cartledge to be brought up with such riff-raff. So he went down there one day and got the baby and brought her up to his two sisters, Miss Ella and Miss Mamie Joe, and made them take her. You see Miss Ella and Miss Mamie Joe around town here and they been old maids I don't know how long. Real Christian women, though. They did

for that girl all a mother could do. Mr. Henry, seemed like, just washed his hands of her. Lived out there in the country on the homeplace with his wife and three boys. Guess he paid a little something for her keep, but I never hear that he did anything else for her. Miss Ella, she's the one works in the Post Office, when Miss Sallie Mae was grown up she took her into the Post Office to help. Leastways she was down there when I come to town, sort of a pale-looking woman passing out the mail. Miss Ella sure done everything she could for her, bringing her up decent, getting her that job. Maybe it was a good thing to have her right there too where Miss Ella could keep an eye on her, her with that bad blood and all. »

Mr. Malachy was holding the jug. He passed it to Mr. Pink and he drank deeply. « Now take me, if I wanted someone to keep me warm in my old age I'd go down to the Flatwoods. But Old Man Witherspoon seemed to take a shine to Miss Sallie Mae and he spoke to Mr. Henry Cartledge and asked for her hand. First thing you knew Miss Sallie Mae was married to Old Man Witherspoon and living up there. »

« Guess Old Man Witherspoon is a right old man? » said Mr. Malachy.

« May and December, » said Mr. Pink, « though I'd never think of Miss Sallie Mae as May. Yep, that old man's old enough to be her daddy. »

He broke into *Love Lifted Me* once more. « Course it coulda been love, » he said, « but t'ain't likely. »

One morning in September Mr. Malachy came to his shop and found Old Man Witherspoon dressed in a blue suit hobbling about and directing Miss Sallie Mae as she looked after the horses. They let Jock, one of the plow horses, out for the day to Man Sitty. Then Old Man Witherspoon stood at Daisy's head and talked to her and kept his eye on Miss Sallie Mae as she curried Daisy from head to foot and moistened a rag to remove a dark spot from one white foreleg. Miss Sallie Mae

moved gingerly and awkwardly about Daisy, as if she feared the thin nervous legs would fly at her. « Bear down harder on that comb, » Old Man Witherspoon said to her. « Daisy here likes to have her back scratched. Don't you Daisy? » And Daisy swung around suddenly so that Miss Sallie Mae jumped back in fright and Old Man Witherspoon nickered in delight.

A little later Old Man Witherspoon looked in the window of the shop, panting a little and resting his weight against the sill. « I'm catching the M.D. and S. up to Macon this morning, » he said to Mr. Malachy. « Doc thinks I ought to get my leg looked after. »

Mr. Malachy came to the window. « Sure and I'm sorry to hear it. Does the leg trouble you much? »

Old Man Witherspoon leaned over and carefully scratched his leg. « Oh, I've had a sore on my leg off and on for the last twenty-five years, I reckon. Sometimes it gets bad. Now like with all this hot weather, it gets to itching and running. It'll be better when it gets cooler. I'll be back in a few days. » He turned and looked toward Daisy in the horse lot, prancing around, the sun shining on her glossy coat. « If Daisy is in the lot alone you'll keep an eye on her, won't you? Just talk to her a little. She just never has got used to Miss Sallie Mae. And if anybody asks... Thank you, suh, thank you. » He bowed stiffly.

Miss Sallie Mae came back in the afternoon leading Daisy on the long rope. He heard Daisy whinnying as she was turned into the lot. Though Mr. Malachy had been thinking of her all day he was surprised to see Miss Sallie Mae come to the door and walk in. Before this she had looked in his window from time to time to give him a message from Old Man Witherspoon, but she had never come inside. Today she carried a pair of dusty white shoes, narrow and pointed.

« I thought maybe I ought to get these fixed, » she said, holding them out to him.

« Yes, Ma'am, » he said, « You want I should have them ready by Sunday? »

She looked vague and stopped to consider the question. « Maybe, » she said. He took the shoes and she stood there hesitating. « You ever get any letters from your sisters in all them different places? »

He paused to answer. He had not thought much about getting letters in recent years. He had not thought of his sisters separately or individually much at all. « No, ma'am, » he said. He stood, feeling that he should do something to offer hospitality. People who hung around to talk to him usually half-leaned or sat on one end of his bench or against the window. The sawmill men squatted on their haunches in the doorway while waiting for a heel to be fixed. He cleared a little place at the end of the bench. « Can't say rightly when I heard the last time, » he said. « Maybe Norfolk. That was way back. » He picked up one of the bottles of Coca Cola cooling in a tub with a piece of ice. « You have a dope, Ma'am? »

She took it from him, drank absently. « That was a right good story you told me that time. I keep thinking about that story, how the cow was bewitched and all. You think it's true that animals can get bewitched? » She glanced out the door where Daisy was prancing around the horse lot on her delicate legs as if she were a circus horse and marched to some music that only she could hear.

He remembered in his bones how true the stories seemed when he was a skinny boy of eight. She went on. « You remember any more stories? I want to hear them all. And about the places you been, I want to hear the names of all of them. » A rosiness burned along her cheekbones. Daisy had stopped her marching at the far corner of the horse lot and now she galloped to the fence where she stood rippling her mane and switching her tail. Her whinnying came like a trumpet call into the little room.

« I reckon I better hurry along now and draw the water, » Miss Sallie Mae said. « That horse is always wanting something. »

Mr. Malachy could hear the well creaking as she let

the windlass unwind and then the slower creaking as she drew the full bucket up again and sloshed it into the trough. Suddenly the thoughts and sights of thirty years rushed to his lips and he wanted to lay them out for her, one by one.

There was a morning, and then there was an afternoon of the second day, and then the third day. On the fourth day as she sat on the bench outside and he stood in the doorway talking to her, Mr. Pink Millwee came with a piece of harness he wanted Mr. Malachy to sew for him. He winked at Mr. Malachy when he came in, and as he started to go, he said to him softly, « You get cold, you better let me take you down to the Flatwoods, » and then he walked on out and past Miss Sallie Mae. « How're you today, Miss Sallie Mae? You hear yet from Old Man Witherspoon? »

She said, « Doc Asbell says he heard they hoped to have him fixed up by the end of the week. »

That day had an evening. In the thick darkness under the live oak trees, Mr. Malachy walked up to Miss Sallie Mae's house. He saw a blur of whiteness on the steps, and he paused at the gate and said, « Good evening, Miss Sallie Mae. » She came to the gate and fumbled with the catch and held the gate open. « You're welcome to come in, Mr. Malachy, » she said.

They sat on the steps. She must have spent the hours since she had last seen him thinking up questions, for they fell thick and fast. Mr. Malachy talked, and since he had spent hours in between recalling his sisters' choicest stories and planning the phrases to brighten those years of moving from port to port, the talk flowed, easily, smoothly, naturally. Soon Miss Sallie Mae fell into the rhythm. She told him about the banshees, which had a moan so horrible that the Negro woman who had told her about them had thrown her apron over her head in the middle of the tale.

One of the stories he told her was about a young woman who had incurred the jealousy of witches. They caught her one day alone and clipped her long golden hair, leaving her ugly and unattractive to the boys of the neighborhood. Miss

Sallie Mae said, « That girl must've looked like me, I reckon. »

Mr. Malachy was too shocked to say anything. He thought of the stories he told her as belonging to another time, another place. He had not even imagined that the girl in the story could conceivably look like Miss Sallie Mae. She was giggling now, as he had never seen her do before, laughing until she put her head back against the porch post helplessly, « Guess if I looked like that girl with the clipped hair, then Aunt Ella and Aunt Mamie Joe looked like those witches. They used to say to me, 'Sallie Mae, you might just as well leave you hair short. That was after I had the typhoid'. 'You'll find it much easier to take care of,' they said. And once when I asked them could I let my hair grow and wear it in puffs like the other girls, they said, 'Just so long as a girl has a clean heart, that's all she needs to worry about,' and that I couldn't hope to be like other girls after what my mother done. They said I should just tend to my sewing and my Sunday school work. »

« Why haven't you let it grow since? » he asked.

« Oh, I don't know, » she said. « It don't seem worthwhile. » She seemed suddenly tired and dispirited.

« I don't think it's ugly, » he said, and reached out in the darkness and stroked her head where the hair grew long on the back of her neck. She did not move or speak, and when he drew his hand away because he thought he might have offended her, she groped for it and drew it back. The feel of her warm flesh under his hard hand moved Mr. Malachy so much that his eyes became moist.

She sat, stiff and straight at first, but soon Mr. Malachy could feel that she was leaning against him and she finally rested her head against his shoulder. Mr. Malachy could feel the tears running down his cheeks but he was afraid to move to brush them away. They sat so quietly that suddenly the night became alive with the small sounds of insects, the wind soughing through the big trees in the churchyard, a baby crying down the street.

Daisy snuffled in her stall, and then he could hear her

bumping against the sides of the little shed. « Maybe you better go now, » whispered Miss Sallie Mae. « It's late. » He could not see her face in the darkness, but he could feel that she had stiffened up again. He stood up and went to the gate and she followed and closed it after him. « I might be able to come to your shop tomorrow evening when it's good dark, » she whispered.

The next evening he sat on the bench while the last color faded from the sky and the darkness became thick and enveloping. Sparrows sleepily chittered in the water oaks, and down the street where Lonzo Carter had his cabin someone pecked on a piano and played a mournful phrase over and over in the bass.

She came, after a while. He could hear her footsteps on the sand and then she turned into the path that ran by the side of the stable. She sat down stiffly apart. « Doc Asbell came by this evening. Said he was up to Macon and the doctors there said Old Man Witherspoon could come home tomorrow. Said there really wasn't much they could do for him. » She turned toward him. « Talk to me, » she said. « Tell me more. »

Thinking that these meetings would end now with so much left untold filled Mr. Malachy with unutterable sadness. He sat there saying nothing, and she reached forward and touched his hand as if she knew what he was thinking. « That's all right, Mr. Malachy, » she said. He had never heard her voice sound soothing before. No one had soothed him since his sisters had tried to still his fears those long years ago in Ireland. « Sometimes I might come down late in the evening, » she said. « Maybe. » She took his hand and placed it on the back of her neck, and he stroked her hair and they sat there without talking. Presently the door slammed at Lonzo Carter's cabin and someone came out and cleared his throat and called good night. The music stopped after a while and the light went off. Still they sat there quietly, her face against his, his hand stroking her gently. After a while he told her a story about Jack Madden rescuing a fair young maiden from the fairies

and returning her to her parents who failed to recognize her or accept her as their daughter.

Miss Sallie Mae then told him about her mother, how she was an old wrinkled countrywoman now, coming up to town on Saturdays and standing out by the wagon with a wad of snuff under her lower lip while the men folks did the week's trading or sat around on their heels in front of the cotton office and talked and sprayed tobacco juice across the brick sidewalk into the street. « She used to come into the Post Office when I was down there and come up to the window. She would say she wanted to buy a stamp. But everybody knew she didn't need a stamp, because she couldn't read or write. Sometimes she would kind of put her face up to the grille and peer to see was I there and then she'd smile and wave her hand a little. Aunt Ella used to make such fun of her, saying what an ignorant, lawless bunch those Flatwooders were with their stills, and how tacky my mother looked coming to town with that old gingham dress and sunbonnet and how good it was for me that my father wanted me brought up decent and given a chance in the world and how they had all worked their hands off looking after me and how some people just didn't show any gratitude. » She laughed breathlessly.

Hearing about the aunts, Mr. Malachy wanted to hold her closer. He kissed her and found that her thin, pale face, the lips almost colorless, the small breasts, held warmth and tenderness. Her lips lingered on his face. Then she sat up quickly. « I must go now, » she said. « I must. » She hurried away down the path, and he listened for her footsteps to die away in the sand under the wateroaks.

Old Man Witherspoon came home the next day. He was a little more frail, and his thin face looked even more like that of some famous general, some famous general on his deathbed. He came down to the stable in the buggy and sat in it while Miss Sallie Mae did the chores. Mr. Malachy went out and asked after Old Man Witherspoon's health, and the Old Man bowed from his seat in the buggy and said, « I

guess the corporosity isn't segashuating too well, but I'll make out, I'll make out. Thank you, thank you. »

Miss Sallie Mae unhitched Daisy and watered her and then, under the Old Man's finicking direction, she curried and brushed until Daisy shone. « That horse looks a mess, » Old Man Witherspoon said. « You ain't looked after her right since I been gone. Bring her over here this way. » He reached out to pat Daisy. « You missed me, didn't you, Daisy? You missed the old man even if nobody else did, » he said. And Daisy nickered and pulled away from Miss Sallie Mae to go and nuzzle in the Old Man's hand.

So for a while, as winter came on, that was the pattern. Sometimes Mr. Malachy did not even go to the door to see them but listened to Old Man Witherspoon's orders, the sound of unwinding windlass, and of water sloshing into the trough. One morning they did not come, and Man Sitty came down and looked after the stock. He said Old Man Witherspoon sure looked mighty feeble. Man Sitty came day after day, then, and one day he shook his head and said, « That old man sure takes a lot of time for dying. Every day I say to myself, Man, he ain't going to be here tomorrow, then next day I come, there he is. And Miss Sallie Mae looking like she ain't going to last herself. »

All that fall Mr. Malachy sat on the bench and watched the sunset through the chinaberry trees across the horselot. The leaves dropped and left bunches of sticky yellow berries which finally dropped too as the weather became cooler and the winds blew. As the winter came on he would take his bottle out to keep him company in the darkness. Mr. Pink Millwee sometimes came by and they would move inside around the little stove and light a lamp. Mr. Pink asked him if he did not want to get away for a little trip. Why not go down to Savannah and see what it was like, see the ocean.

« There's a preacher down there I want to hear, » said Mr. Pink.

This was the kind of suggestion that Mr. Malachy had often responded to in the past, a trip to Norfolk, a trip to

Winston-Salem, a trip to Atlanta. Now a trip to Savannah. Perhaps he would never come back, but would continue that slide down the map he had begun.

« No, » he said. « Them shoes there. » He gestured toward a pile on the shelf, « I got them promised for Saturday. »

Old Man Witherspoon lived out the worst of the winter. One morning in February, Man Sitty told Mr. Malachy that Old Man Witherspoon had died in the night. Later in the day a little boy came and held in front of Mr. Malachy an announcement written in a flowing Spencerian hand and decorated with a swallow bearing a streamer with the words REST IN PEACE and the news that Mr. James Wardlow Witherspoon had passed away in his seventy-fifth year and would be laid to rest in the Greenwood Baptist Cemetery next day at eleven o'clock. The public was invited. Mr. Malachy had not attended a funeral since his days on the British ship when he had seen the body of one of his mates committed to the sea. He sat at his bench the morning of the funeral wondering if he were included in the public invited and if he wanted to go if he were. The matter was settled for him by Mr. Pink Millwee who came by early and asked if Mr. Malachy wanted to walk with him to the church. « You being a renter and all, maybe it would be a nice thing for his widow for you to go, » he said.

Mr. Malachy put on a tie und wore the khaki overcoat he had worn in Atlanta. But he could not bring himself to go inside the church, whether from shyness or from stubbornness (remembering the attempts to save his soul), he himself did not know. He sat out on the cold cement steps and when the strains of *Abide With Me* died away inside and he heard the shuffle of feet going out the side door toward the cemetery, he walked around the side of the church and joined the procession following the coffin to the grave. Miss Sallie Mae was behind the casket supported by two old ladies in black whose eyes were red from crying. Miss Sallie Mae was thinner than before, and blue shadows lay under her eyes. She looked delicate and frail. She seemed to be as unaware of her surround-

ings as when she used to sit on the bench by the side of the livery stable and stare off into the distance. Mr. Malachy recognized the two old ladies nudging her along as the aunts who had brought her up. Last fall Miss Ella had come into the shoe shop with two pairs of shoes, oddly small and dainty for such stout ladies, and he had made up a story for Miss Sallie Mae to laugh at about finding the imprint of cloven hoofs inside the shoes. He smiled when he thought of it, and Miss Sallie Mae, on the other side of the grave with her attention pitched on some distant object looked at him for a moment and there was a flicker of recognition in her big gray eyes.

That afternoon after the funeral a nephew of Old Man Witherspoon came down to the stable with Man Sitty to water the stock. Mr. Malachy heard him say, « I like mules myself. Now I could use Jock here for plowing, though I don't rightly need another animal now. They eat too much. And I might be able to get rid of Adam here. Couldn't get much, though. »

Man Sitty said, « That Daisy there is a mighty pretty horse. »

« That's right, » said the nephew. « I don't know anybody, though, that's got use for a horse like that. She's a pretty built horse but she's got a right mean look in her eye. »

Mr. Malachy moved to the window. Strangely enough, though Miss Sallie Mae had talked about Daisy being mean, or « bewitched, » he had never seen Daisy with what he would call a mean look in her eye. That was one of the queer ideas Miss Sallie Mae had, a sort of childishness that made her take his stories literally. He stood at the window thinking of Miss Sallie Mae and how this childishness, this kind of innocence, made her more endearing.

Man Sitty said, « Daisy here would be a nice horse for a fellow who likes to ride. You could take her up to Macon to the State Fair. I hear tell they have races for horses like her up there. »

« I got no time for running around to State Fairs. And

when I come into town to trade I come in with a load of something pulled by the mules. I always thought it was a right crazy streak for Uncle Jim to keep a horse like that. I reckon he always thought his folks had the same kind of money they had before the war. Mama said he was a fancy rider when he was a young man and he used to go all around to horse races, even way down to New Orleans. That seems like foolishness to me. »

« Sure don't see how Miss Sallie Mae can keep a horse like that, « Man Sitty said. « Tell you the God's truth, she don't like that horse. She say to me once that horse bit her. Course I ain't saying she's a bad horse. She ain't never bit me. Me and Daisy get along right well, don't we, Daisy? » Daisy had come up to the fence and Man Sitty stroked her face and patted her on the neck.

Daisy curved her neck to meet his caress. Then she suddenly stormed off and pranced around the lot. « Why don't you take her? » the nephew said. « You could ride her into town on Saturdays. Miss Sallie Mae said you ain't had any stock since your mule died. She sure won't do you any good for plowing, though. »

« I couldn't feed her, » Man Sitty said, « I just naturally couldn't buy her the oats and stuff a horse needs. I'm saving up now to get me another mule and it sure takes a long time when your cash crop goes to pay off what you owe on the land. »

The nephew turned to go. « I'll get the other horses first Saturday I come into town. Reckon Miss Sallie Mae is going to have to worry about Daisy. Maybe if she can't get shet of her any other way, you'll have to take her out and shoot her. »

« Not me, boss. Don't ask me to shoot any horse. Daisy here wouldn't stand for it, would you, Daisy? »

At first Miss Sallie Mae said she just could not get any rest until Daisy was sold. Later she said she sometimes felt Daisy was hung around her neck like a millstone. These

remarks she said distractedly to Mr. Malachy as she passed his window or door. Now she came down each day to follow the routine that had become habit to Daisy. If Miss Sallie Mae felt like leaving Daisy in the lot near the livery stable, Daisy whinnied, cavorted, bawled, kicked on the boards and chewed viciously on the fence posts. Mr. Malachy still could not see that « mean look » that Miss Sallie Mae and others talked about, but he could see that Daisy was acting like a spoiled child. He asked Miss Sallie Mae once in her exasperation why she did not get Man Sitty to look after Daisy for her. « I can't afford feed for that horse, much less pay someone to tend to her, » she told him.

In the weeks after Old Man Witherspoon's death, two or three persons dropped by to see Daisy, mostly unwilling fathers being pulled by young daughters. « Look at her, Pa. Isn't she just beautiful? » Mr. Malachy moved to the window to watch her, too, standing so proudly on her long legs, nervously twitching her head as if she felt their eyes upon her. « Can't I have her, Pa, can't I? » And the fathers would usually say, « Why, honey, I wouldn't any more let you get up on that horse than I'd let you fly to Guinea. That horse has got the meanest look of any horse I ever saw. »

Miss Sallie Mae said she wrote up to one of the men who used to take Daisy when he went fishing; and he said he did not have a place to keep Daisy or he would surely take her. But if Miss Sallie Mae would just keep her, he would come down and hire her every now and then when he wanted to go out to Logan's Pond.

Then Man Sitty told Mr. Malachy that Miss Sallie Mae had been trying to get him to take Daisy out and shoot her. But he said he just couldn't shoot that horse. Finally he told Miss Sallie Mae that if she couldn't get shet of Daisy any other way, he would take her, if Miss Sallie Mae would help him with the oats until he was able to make a crop to feed Daisy. One Saturday afternoon, then, Miss Sallie Mae and Man Sitty and Daisy came to the livery stable. Daisy was hitched to the little buggy and Miss Sally Mae piled the seat beside

Man Sitty with old harness and ropes. Anything she could find hanging on a nail she grabbed down and threw into the buggy with Man Sitty.

« That man with the Coca Cola truck says he'd like right well to rent this shed for his truck and I'd like to get it all cleaned out for him, » she explained.

« That's too much, Miss Sallie Mae, » Man Sitty said. « Maybe Droody can come in and give you a little hand with the cleaning or do a little washing to pay for all the harness. »

Miss Sallie Mae's voice was carefree. « She don't need to bother, Man. Bring me a mess of turnip greens when yours come in. I don't need any help. »

Mr. Malachy waited as the buggy drove away. He waxed the stitches and pushed them through the leather, feeling a deep excitement as he waited, feeling that a millstone had been lifted from his neck, too. He listened for her steps to move out of the shed and come down the path toward the door. He put down his work, unable to keep his hand steady, and moved to the window, but she was disappearing up the street toward home. She was almost running.

Now every evening the Coca-Cola man would back his truck into the shed where Daisy's buggy used to sit, and every morning when Mr. Malachy came down to his shop the truck would be gone and only the smell of its backfire lingered on the spring air.

When the first of May came, Mr. Malachy thought he ought to see Miss Sallie Mae about paying his rent. She made no move to come to collect it. One Sunday afternoon he walked up the street, past houses where the ladies sat and swung in the porch swings and the men sat with their feet up on the bannisters and newspapers over their faces. Miss Sallie Mae was sitting rocking on her porch. She looked very much like the other ladies, except for her short hair. She was wearing the shoes he had fixed for her, white with pointed toes and cuban heels. Mr. Malachy took off his hat and stood at the gate.

« Good evening, Mr. Malachy, » she said. « Won't you come in and set awhile? »

Mr. Malachy unlatched the gate and came in, fumblingly, uncertainly, feeling a bashfulness he had never felt before.

« Have a chair, Mr. Malachy, » she said.

« Thought it was about time I paid you the rent for the shop, » he said. « I owe you for April. »

« I wasn't in any hurry, Mr. Malachy, » she said. « I knew I'd get it sometime. Set awhile and talk. »

They sat there on that sunny Sunday afternoon, rocking a little and not talking much. Miss Sallie Mae was looking better and much younger now that she had fattened up a little. She had discarded the black she had worn after Old Man Witherspoon's death, and had on a white dress with blue dots in it. She still sat and looked off into the distance and kept quiet, but she did not seem mournful. Occasionally someone would pass by, going to the cemetery with flowers, or just out for a walk, and they would smile and say Howdy to Miss Sallie and to him.

Miss Sallie Mae told him that her aunts wanted her to come back and live with them, said they didn't think it looked nice, a young woman living alone. « But, Lord, I told them if thirty-eight isn't old enough to live alone, then I don't reckon I ever will be old enough. They even got Pa to come up here and talk to me and tell me I ought to go back over to Aunt Ella's and Aunt Mamie Joe's. He hadn't been up here in several years; I reckon maybe it was two or three years since I'd seen him at all until the funeral. He's getting to be a right old man now. They say he don't do much, lies around down there in the country half drunk, and one of his sons really runs the farm. I told him the same thing I told my aunts. He didn't say much. He don't really care one way or another. My aunts just put him up to coming up here. » She rocked a little and laughed, then fell into silence.

Mr. Malachy stood up to go. He thought of all those nights he had sat waiting, all fall, all winter. He looked at her rocking and patting her toe a little, and he said to himself

that she meant no more to him than one of the other women he had passed sitting on their porches that Sunday afternoon. Perhaps he could still get Mr. Pink Millwee to take that trip to Savannah. He walked down the little path leading to the gate, with the glass bottles up-ended to form a border, and she said, « Come back and set next Sunday, Mr. Malachy. You're right welcome, you know. »

So he did not speak to Mr. Pink Millwee about the trip, thinking he would go up to see Miss Sallie Mae one more time before he took off.

The next Sunday she was in the same place and just as welcoming. But she seemed disturbed.

She tapped her feet in the white pointed shoes nervously. « Seems like I just lost the habit of sleeping when Old Man Witherspoon was sick. And then Daisy — » her voice seemed to shake a little, « then Daisy came tearing in here last night. She stood out there at the gate whinnying and carrying on. I had to go out and let her into her old stall. I thought once Man Sitty took her I'd have her off my mind. »

« Maybe Man doesn't feed her too well, » Mr. Malachy said, « though she looks sleek as ever. »

« No, » said Miss Sallie Mae, « No, it's not that. She hates me, that horse does. If she was hungry, she'd go to the stable. That's where the food stayed. No, she's mean. The other night I was scared to open the gate to let her in and yet I was scared not to open it. »

« Maybe Man could tie her up, » said Mr. Malachy, hoping Miss Sallie Mae would go on to another subject. He said soothingly, « I'm sure Man can manage her if you ask him to. »

« He said he'd tie her up at night. He said so this morning when he came to get her. »

Mr. Malachy, postponing the trip to Savannah from week to week to sit on Miss Sallie Mae's porch for an hour or two on Sunday, finally began to see the light. Evening after evening he waited on the bench by the livery stable with the bottle for company, but she did not come. During the day he decided a hundred times to end it all and take the M. D. and

S. down to Savannah, but he would end up on the bench, thinking about Miss Sallie Mae.

One Sunday afternoon on his way to her house, he decided that he would just say goodbye this time and start out, maybe take the down train on Monday afternoon. When he reached her house, dripping perspiration from the short walk on this hot and breathless afternoon, he found Miss Sallie Mae on the porch, looking cool and quiet.

« Sure is hot, Mr. Malachy. Come on out and we'll draw up some cool water from the well. » She led him through the darkened house, and before she reached the back door leading to the well, she turned to him. « Oh, Mr. Malachy, » she said. Later they sat on the well-bench, and after the sun went down, they decided they would be married.

Dear Sisters (Mary in Ireland, Anna in Heaven, Lizzie in New York, Anna where, Kate and Jane, Oh where?), now I should say that the lovers lived happily ever after.

Miss Sallie Mae's aunts came into the shop and told Mr. Malachy that it was unbecoming of him and Miss Sallie Mae to get married only seven months after Old Man Witherspoon died. They said Miss Sallie Mae should wait a year. They said other things as they stood there in front of his bench, two dumpy little old ladies. Mr. Malachy had risen when they came in, then settled back to his shoes as the talk went on and on. This was the first time he had seen Miss Mamie Joe, the younger of the two sisters, to speak to. She would try to fill the silences in a timid hesitating voice when her sister ran out of words. Miss Ella seemed to be torn by the pride of family that rode high in her bosom. Miss Sallie Mae did have Cartledge blood, and she hinted that a foreigner whose background was shrouded in mist was an unsuitable match for her high-born niece. On the other hand, she hinted at dark and evil strains, the Flatwood contribution, that sullied the Cartledge blood, and were a weakening and unaccountable influence. The stream of words flowed on and on, circling and coiling and covering the same ground.

Mr. Malachy thought of the complicated incantations in

the old stories to rid a family of witches. In one story footwater from the washing of the youngest in the house was thrown upon the witches; or a cake baked with a little blood drawn from all members of the family troubled by witches was fed to them. Sets of words chanted suddenly might cause them to disappear in a clap of thunder. Perhaps a horseshoe over the door. He had seen them hanging over the doors of Negro cabins. Perhaps that would do the trick.

The stream of words flowed on. Then absent-mindedly, as if brushing away a troublesome fly, he crossed himself and muttered, « Whisht, whisht! » Miss Ella's voice stopped suddenly and the silence was almost as loud as a clap of thunder. Miss Mamie Joe stepped back in fear. Miss Ella looked at him suspiciously, then took a deep breath and said, « Coming in here with a lot of heathen ideas, a man with no family, no fr — »

« Sure and I have a family, » Mr. Malachy said. « There are me seven sisters and myself, Mary, Anna, Lizzie, Agnes, Anna, Kate, and Jane. »

« Oh, » said Miss Ella. « Seven sisters. » Mr. Malachy was seeing Mary and Anna at about nine and ten and the rest trailing back, a hazy mixture of pale faces and tow heads. « Yes, me seven sisters, Mary in Ireland, Anna in Heaven, Lizzie in New York, Agnes in New York, Anna, where, Kate and Jane, oh where. » Miss Ella backed away still further, as if she saw all seven sisters standing behind Mr. Malachy glaring at her. She found a wad of handkerchief in her pocket and blew her nose. « Well, » she said, « it's indecent. Poor Mr. Witherspoon, hardly cold in his grave. » She pulled her black shawl around her head then and Miss Mamie Joe did the same. Miss Ella turned to leave and Miss Mamie Joe followed her, but when she got to the door she turned and said to Mr. Malachy in a whisper, « I'd be right proud to meet your sisters, Mr. Malachy. Those that could come, » she said.

Mrs. Rush Thomas, who lived next door to Miss Sallie Mae stopped Mr. Malachy on his way there the next Sunday and said, « I do declare, Mr. Malachy, I'm mighty glad to hear

the news. I think it's real nice, I sure do. Miss Sallie Mae just never had a chance for happiness, poor girl. She deserves a little now. » She grabbed his hand and shook it vigorously. « I hope you and her have a long life and lots of happiness, and, » here she giggled and looked archly at him, « may all your troubles be little ones. » Mr. Malachy did not understand what Mrs. Rush Thomas was trying to say to him and he did not laugh, but took off his hat and bowed with the hat held against his chest and said, « Thank you, Ma'am. »

Thus, Mr. Malachy, who had been blown around the four quarters of the globe, found that he had pinned himself to a spot, an act of will he had never expected of himself. And Miss Sallie Mae, who had never been further away from where she was born than Macon, found a home. Not one of the stories that Mr. Malachy remembered described such happiness as theirs.

The days bore the pattern of respectability that Miss Sallie Mae had set for herself after Old Man Witherspoon's death. She and Mr. Malachy walked sedately to his shoe shop in the morning, forbearing to hold each other's hand as they passed down the sidewalk under the water oaks. She would stand for a while in his doorway or rest for a few minutes on the bench. Then she would go back to the house and pick the turnip greens and set them boiling with a piece of sidemeat for his dinner. In the late afternoon she would walk down to come home with him, Mr. Malachy greeting returning neighbors with Good evening Ma'am or Sir and Miss Sallie Mae with Howdy. These daytime hours, though they marked the accomplishment of a pair or two of shoes mended for him, the garden weeded and the house straightened by her, were really the resting, storing-up period of the day. The real business came as darkness fell. It is true that sometimes they were obliged to go to bed together even before they had eaten their supper, but that, too, was not necessarily the meaning and point of the day. Did it come when they sat outside in the dusk on the steps, or later in the dark, when they moved to the chairs and passed the bottle back and forth for short sips,

or as the evenings grew cooler, sitting in the kitchen by the stove, or later in bed for the night with the talk going on and on, talk that had been stored up for years bubbling slowly and happily out. At times their happiness, when compared with their earlier dreary years, brought on an almost hysterical reaction, particularly with Miss Sallie Mae, if she had been sipping too frequently on the bottle.

Once when she was telling Mr. Malachy about some of the meannesses and persecutions she had endured while Old Man Witherspoon was alive, she jumped up from the cane-bottomed chair by the kitchen stove and rushed to the back door. « It's too hot in here, » she cried, and flew into the yard and started the windlass unwinding in the well. She did not wait to wind it up again, but began unbuttoning her dress and tearing it off. Mr. Malachy tried to soothe her and held her close to him on the well seat and talked softly and quietly. She trembled and her legs jerked and her teeth chattered. He ran to the house for a quilt and when he returned he found her kicking at the little fence around a peach tree and jerking out the props under the boughs. Mr. Malachy threw the quilt around her and after a while she rested against him and put her head on his shoulder and they went into the house and he put her to bed.

One night, when spring seemed to have come in February, they sat on the well-seat, their backs against the rough boards of the well. The night seemed to have the freshness of water and Mr. Malachy could feel the dark and secret water behind him at the bottom of the well. He was reminded of the story of the Waterhorse, a strange steed that used to come out of the sea and gallop on the beaches. People would try to catch and tame this beautiful creature and all would go well as long as he was kept away from the sight of the sea. Mr. Malachy wandered on and on in the story, telling this and that about the Waterhorse, remembering more as he talked, then finishing and falling into silence. They sat there, easy and quiet. Mr. Malachy's hand rested on Miss Sallie Mae's neck, and the warmth of her flesh under his hand moved him to suggest

that they should go inside. She turned more closely into his arms and raised her face to his, but she did not move. This was good, too, she seemed to say, as she brushed her lips against his mouth and cheek, slowly, lingeringly. Mr. Malachy felt that he could weep with love and joy. The night was very dark. There was no moon and the distant stars were sometimes obscured by wisps of cloud. Her kisses had become shorter and sharper now, and Mr. Malachy thought, why not here in this soft night, and he began to push her gently down on the well-seat, but where she had been all soft and yielding she stiffened now under his hand and sat up pushing him away. « Hear that? » she said.

He listened and thought perhaps he heard the faint clomp-clomp of horse's feet in the hard-packed clay of the street. The hollow clomp, clomp came closer, and Miss Sallie Mae pulled away from him and sat on the edge of the well-seat.

The horse then became a more solid piece of darkness at the gate, with little flashes of white from ankles and eye-balls. They could hear her better than they could see her, snuffling and wheezing and cavorting at the gate. For a minute the dark shape, the searching, snuffling noises, as if some loathsome creature sought to probe their defenses, made Mr. Malachy chill with fear.

« It's Daisy, » Miss Sallie Mae whispered.

« I'll let her in, » Mr. Malachy said. Somehow, having her name said had removed the fear. He had never been afraid of Daisy.

« No, » Miss Sallie Mae screamed, but softly. « No, you mustn't. She'll bite you! She'll kick you, or harm you in some way. She hates me and she'll hurt you. »

She was trembling and holding him. Daisy whinnied and stamped her feet at the gate.

« Go inside, » Mr. Malachy said. « I'm not afraid of her. We can't leave her there at the gate all night. Go inside, » he said again and gently pushed her into the light kitchen and shut the door.

He opened the gate, and Daisy sped past him toward her stall. He closed the stall door and barred it and went into the house. Miss Sallie Mae was sitting by the stove, hunched and weeping. Several days passed before she became her old self again.

After that he felt a kind of watchfulness. The bottle still sat between them, but he tried to sip of it less often himself. After a time the nights were undisturbed in their beauty.

Sometimes during the day however Miss Sallie Mae would come flying down the sidewalk as if she were bewitched, and fling herself on the bench where she would sit looking like the Miss Sallie Mae he had first known, pale, silent, and strange. He found it hard even to think of her like that anymore, knowing her warmth and thinking of her with her face turned toward him, color along her cheekbones, her mouth a little open, her eyes gazing into his with that deep, deep attention that always stirred him to the depths.

On one of the good nights, Miss Sallie Mae said that she was going to make Mr. Malachy sit down and write his sisters. « I don't believe you want to tell them about me, » she said. Sometimes she would ask, as she lay on her pillow watching him solemnly, if his sisters had the same eagle nose, the same high cheekbones, and, running a finger along the line of his cheek and chin, if they had the same ugly chin jutting out to meet the world?

« Which one favors you most? » she would ask, « Mary, Anna, Lizzie, Agnes, Anna, Kate, or Jane? » and he would answer, « Sure, they are all as beautiful and clever as their brother. »

Man Sitty's wife, Droody, had offered to do Miss Sallie Mae's wash after she was married in payment for the buggy and the harness and other things that Miss Sallie Mae had given to Man Sitty along with Daisy. Man Sitty planted oats, and after the first few months he did not have to accept help from Miss Sallie Mae to feed Daisy. Man Sitty always drove Droody in with the wash, but he did not drive up to Miss Sallie Mae's. He tied Daisy to a post in front of the store

where he was going to do his trading, and Droody put the basket of clothes on her head and walked to Miss Sallie Mae's. Miss Sallie Mae had said to him she would be happy if she never saw Daisy again. Man Sitty sometimes drove around to the shoe shop and called to Mr. Malachy. He would go out and talk to Man as he sat in the buggy holding onto the reins.

« Sure hope you don't think it's ungrateful of me asking you to come out like this, Mr. Malachy, » Man Sitty said « This old Daisy sure acts like a fool sometime. Jerks on the reins and — see her? » Daisy had suddenly swung her head and rippled her rear withers and whinnied. « That old fool horse. »

« You keep her mighty nice, Man, » said Mr. Malachy. « I certainly admire the way her coat is shining. »

« I got good grass in the pasture and she eats it all right, but I can't let her run. I got to put a rope on her and tie her to something and let her just eat her self around in a ring. Then I have to go out and untie her and tie her up somewhere else again. I'm right sorry about her getting loose and coming up there bothering Miss Sallie Mae. That horse has sure got the devil in her. I used to think Miss Sallie Mae was right funny the way she talked about Daisy. But sometimes I think she don't really know the half of it. »

The part of the story that came next is the part that Mr. Malachy brooded over day after day, thinking how it might have been different, thinking, if he had given up the corn liquor, would that have saved them, thinking that if he had worked harder and saved her strength perhaps life could have continued as it had begun for them, thinking too that if they had not stayed up those nights endlessly talking, she would have been more rested. Thinking over and over, wondering where the mistake had been made. (*Oh, sisters, oh Mary, Anna, if you could be here to tell me* —) On some days when he was feeling his worst he felt that neither he nor she had been treated fairly by God, or by Providence or by Fate or by the Fairies. It seemed unfair that he who had rolled along, not even knowing that he was half-living, and then striking the

meaning and richness of life, should have that meaning snatched from him. It seemed unfair to her that, having suffered the insults and petty persecutions of her aunts all these years, and then endured the years with a tyrannical and hateful old man, she should have happiness snatched from her grasp after she had barely recognized it. In most of the stories, when the heroine was rescued from the witches she and the hero lived happily ever after. But he had to admit that there were other stories which began at the point where a young couple were envied for their happiness and were therefore persecuted by some evil fairy or leprechaun or banshee. That must have been the trouble. They had been too happy.

Along toward the spring of that year after they were married, Miss Sallie Mae had a spell of nervousness that lasted for several days. She had had days before of being upset and worried and unsmiling, Mr. Malachy even called them to himself, her « bewitched » days. He felt he had almost succeeded in finding the right counter-charm for those days. He tried to go easy on the bottle and he tried to get her to bed for more rest. He would talk about long slow voyages through calm seas, to countries where everything was peaceful and quiet, the natives friendly. But the bad days had hung on and on this time so that when he could not remember he began to invent, but invention in such a subdued key came easily. Event was not the important thing, it seemed, but rather the continuous drone of his voice that sometimes made him drowsy before it did her.

After this siege Miss Sallie Mae became for him again her eager, sweet, curious, lively self, the pearl he had found where no one suspected a pearl might be hidden. One evening she seemed so cheerful and the world and weather in keeping that they walked back through the cemetery after supper where the daffodils were nodding above the graves, and into the pinewoods, back over the hill to the Negro house where Mr. Malachy filled his vinegar bottle. It was still light when they started home and they sat down on the pine needles on the little hill and unstoppered the bottle to wait for darkness.

Miss Sallie Mae had remembered that it was a Wednesday night and the Baptist Church would be lit. A few people would be straggling through the dusk to attend prayer meeting.

They sat there in a little glade that sloped down to a meadow where a small stream ran. Miss Sallie Mae showed him how she had wanted to roll over and over on the pine needles when she was a child on occasional trips to the woods, but the aunts had cautioned her against it, saying it was not a nice thing for a girl to do, showing up under her dress. And she told him how some of the children used to bring worn out dishpans and slide down the pine-needled hill as fast as a sled on snow. She was so gay, her voice so joyful, buoyant, like that of a person let out of prison and feeling the air and smelling the good smell of freedom, Mr. Malachy tried to coax her to a little bed of pine needles that he had piled up under a tree, but though she did not move his hand from her breasts, he could see that she felt shy. As they waited there with her in his arms quietly watching the light fade, Mr. Malachy felt the happiest he had ever felt in his life, and after a while, when the pine tree had lost form in the darkness, he was able to roll her gently over on to the bed of pine needles.

The church was dark when they came picking their way along the fence by the side of the cemetery. Miss Sallie Mae said she was not really scared but she just kind of hated to go stumbling around in a graveyard at night. Now they were out from under the trees they could see clouds rolling up across the sky, and little blasts of wind were whipping the tall grasses in the fields where they walked.

« Looks like it's fixing up to rain, » Miss Sallie Mae said as they hurried on and crawled under the last barbed wire fence and ran across the lawn in front of the church to their house.

They were both so tired and sleepy that they hardly paused to undress and were asleep almost as soon as they hit the bed.

Mr. Malachy was pulled up out of a deep well of sleep, to screaming, and then he felt the bed shake and heard Miss Sallie Mae's little moans and sobs.

« Sallie Mae! » he said. « Sallie Mae, what is it? »

Her trembling increased and the bed shook and now Mr. Malachy could hear that the night was alive with movement. A shutter banged on the back of the house and a soughing of wind through the big trees filled the darkness with unrest.

« What is it, Sallie Mae? What is it? » He found her hands and tried to draw them down from her mouth. « Tell me. »

« I heard it, I heard it, » she sobbed.

« Heard what, my little darling? » he soothed. And then he heard it, too, the high shrill screaming of a soul in torment, a keening from the dream, the worst of dreams. He turned cold.

« The banshee, » she cried. « It's come. »

His heart curled inside him as the screaming came again, borne on the soughing of the wind and raving off with it through the trees into the dark night, as if a creature from the most ominous of the stories moved with the wind.

In the stories the banshee had to be met with decision. He sprang from the bed and ran through the kitchen to the back door. Clouds scudded fast across the sky and the wind swished higher and higher, and he ran past the well-seat and across the hard-packed yard toward the front of the house. The scream died off again and he could hear the thrashing at the fence. « Daisy! » he said, his teeth chattering out the name. He could see the dark writhing form, her neck impaled on the strands of barbed wire. He could see the wet whites of her eyes and the white foam on her curled lips and the bared white teeth.

Lights sprang on in the Thomas house next door, and he turned back calling to Miss Sallie Mae as he ran, « It's Daisy, Sallie Mae. It 's only Daisy. »

He lit a lamp in the kitchen and carried it with him into

the bedroom, but Miss Sallie Mae was out of the bed and in the corner of the room, huddled and shaking and moaning.

« It's just Daisy, » he told her. « You don't have to fret. » He lifted her back to the bed and pulled the cover up over her trembling knees. Daisy's screams still rose and fell on the night, but as he pulled the quilt up under Miss Sally Mae's chin, a gun shot rang out, and the scream tailed off.

« It's all right now, » he said. « Everything will be all right. There's no banshee and no Daisy. »

But he was never quite sure that Miss Sallie Mae knew even then whose hands smoothed the hair on her brow.

Doc Asbell got the sheriff to furnish a car and a driver to take Miss Sallie Mae over to Milledgeville. He also asked for a deputy because he said he was too old to handle obstreperous folks. The deputy sat on one side of Miss Sallie Mae on the back seat, and Mr. Malachy on the other. Doc Asbell sat up front with the driver, his beard, stained with tobacco juice, touching the little black bag he held open in his lap. When Miss Sallie Mae tried too hard to climb out of the car, he had Mr. Malachy and the deputy hold her arm up over the front seat and he jabbed her with morphine. Finally the drive came to an end, and Miss Sallie Mae walked away with the nurse. She did not look up when Mr. Malachy kissed her good-bye.

Mr. Malachy came home to Miss Sallie Mae's house, or to put it rightly, he often told himself, to Old Man Witherspoon's house. He slept in Old Man Witherspoon's big spool bed. Stud Self had offered him twenty dollars for that bed. He thought it was foolish of Stud Self's wife, wanting to pay good money for that old bed, but he would not accept it anyhow. He kept hoping that Miss Sallie Mae would come back soon, and she would want her own bed.

Now that he no longer had a little shoe shop down in the livery stable, but had his bench set up in the kitchen, he found he did not always have the money he needed, even

for his simple wants that did not go beyond plain food and corn liquor. Stud Self and his wife came by every few weeks and asked about the bed. Finally he had taken a little loan on it, just five dollars, and Stud had laughed and said to his wife that now she owned one leg of the bed anyhow.

The time stretched on and on and they still said Miss Sallie Mae could not come home. Perhaps now with spring coming on, he ought to light out again.

Dear Sisters, (Mary in Ireland, Anna in Heaven, Lizzie in New York, Agnes in New York, Anna where, Kate and Jane, Oh where?) If I could get this letter finished I could light out again, he said as he rose from the breakfast table and picked up Miss Genie Cantwell's white pumps.

ELLIOTT STEIN

SEVEN POEMS

LOVE ON THE ÎLE SAINT LOUIS

The pile was once two islands.
Take my hand, Herta, there were
Houses on the bridge,
Old the gossip of the wood:

I murthered my lover
I married another
I would that another
Would murther me now.

The wood lies, endlessly,
Houses lie, endlessly
Voices lie, endlessly
Since the world began.

(In the air
A crow turning.)

An organ fills the street
With fugue and counterfugue
The men away at war
The women sit and brood—

And here is where Joan's horses bathed,
See the horses!

(The air!
A crow turning.)

The city wall is full of cracks
(The awful crow turning)
And over there, another isle
(Joan burning, burning)
Bundled in timelessness, buffets in time.

Through the air
Blue now
The river sips
Pebbles from the tip
Of the island.

NOCTATION

Music in the night at
two o two o
two o clock
is like a sudden
sacred hand petting
skulldome of your plans.

It files away the night at
two o two o
two o clock,
it speaks of HEARTS,
their plots and speech,
of pause and time to understand.

It swears that song
will follow follow
song will follow
song o,
in a ball of
stable and unbarricaded
music,
to seal the panic window
on the blooded lamplights
of a city once was
acred and is
crack-edged
now,
like the crack o
crack o joke o
of a broken knuckle
at two o clock.

THE OTHER

My brother twin who died at birth was tall,
Deep eyes as if some bird had been and gone,
A mouth no mouth had ever lingered on,
My brother twin who died at birth was tall.

Deep eyes as if some bird had been and gone
And fingers white which turned to blue and black,
To colors that concede no turning back,
Deep eyes as if some bird had been and gone.

And fingers white which turned to black and blue,
Deep eyes which now I almost see in you,
But you are not like him at all, at all,
My brother twin who died at birth was tall.

LA STRADA

on the harp
of my mind
there are sounds
of a ball,
there is light
on a beach
that runs out,
out of reach

can I pick
out a FOX
or a gigue
from the day
which I made
up for you
and for you
who
should stay?

on the harp
of my mind
by the touch
of a wing
was a blue
bent to red
was a blur
on the string.

SONS OF KONG

Ceiling fans like dragon flies
Flick up hot air and dream of skies,
Skies in turn are pocked with soot

And dream of buckled shiny boot,
Boots ideally rough as chain
Are silkier than lion's mane;
That lion would be lioness,
Turns head to wall in sweet duress:
The wall's been central since we've skies,
Air, lions, boots, and dragon flies.

PONZA, MY PONZA

If, one day off a slug boat to Naples,
I put an end to something yours,
And tilting by small island
Of pink and Klee houses
There was one less
Among fat ladies and wet wicker baskets,
While the lazy town beauties
Spread out to new lovers
Sped faster and early
By the ballast of one single recent heart—

Take the skull,
Take, and look at the unravelled eyes.
Look hard,
A skull is a toy, something to draw from life now.
The pack got in to Naples on time.

GIGUE

The dead lie buried in their married beds
as thistles clutch the falling air,
the sky is lucid and unhandles statues
hands attempt.

Palms crack, crumble, folding
dust. Sounds lie,

as sounds remember;
feet walk up to doors, retreat, as shovels pick
night's matter; wind lifts paper candles, mussels
leave their shells and waylay moons.

Spokes bear toes' gift, stars
wade softly on a robber's skull;
inscribed in arms, blood listens,
winces, waits.

JEAN GARRIGUE

FOR THE FOUNTAINS AND FOUNTANIERS OF VILLA D'ESTE

I

Say that these are the fireworks of water,
One hundred fountains on the tiers of plains;
That goddesses enthroned hold spears of it,
It erupts from the mouths of shagged eagles,
And moss-legged gods, one side of a face worn off by it,
Straddle the silver, unmitigated flood.
Say that the down play and up play
And fourteen shafts around a central plume
Not to discount the dragons spouting it
That meet two dolphins plunged on it
Sending their streams against the contending ones,
Are a continuum in a series of play by water
And play by light on the water, making arcs
Of a spectrum in the din and bafflement
Of that most muffled watery bell beat, pell mell and lulle
stampede,
So that an insatiable thirst
Cannot be allayed in the blood.
Though they flow round the very bones
Though a tumult of vapor rising from them

Blows the leaves of the trees by their weight,
Nothing, no, not by any rain-making vows
Nor wines cooler than brook-flowing waters
Nor any meandering of boughs
Down the stone-flagged paths and the avenues
Of the serpentine oleander
Whose branch knots and slippering leaves
Knit such a shade in the place of green dark
It is a scandal of pleasure,
Say that nothing, no limestone grotto alive
With the scaly-thighed god gushing forth
This silver, non-potable liquid
Can convey to the fever coolness
Nor a slaking, a quenching by dews
Where the scent of the water buds.

Here are fans of water, and silver combs,
Peacock-eyed in the sun-glints upon them,
Very vines and wreathes trailed round a stone.
The thirst of it is delirium.
It heaps on the brain,
It plunges along the arm,
In a sleep by leaves
It buries half the blood.
Taking one sinuous course down the breast
It would thrust and lock round the heart in a thrice.

While to stand, sheathed in a grotto
On the reverse side of this shield of water,
Downpouring in pound on pound
Its chafed, silver-shot metal...
I know of no fury that tells
More to me, deafening, than that
Of a velocity past which I'd know
Nothing but the hurl and fall
Of those burst rockets of water
Driving their sweetness down

In a blaze of lightnings and stars
As in wet dusts shattering on stone
To explode with soft fury again.

Shield of the water and water wall,
Water roots, tentacles, bars,
Spears of water and bolts,
I know nothing here but the sense
In this downflowing fall
Of the wilderness of eternity.
And I am flailed to earth.
I am dank as a river god.
Scallop on scallop of the primeval flat water leaf
With no roots but in water, taking its substance from liquid,
Coats me and jackets me over.
I am dense as lichen,
Primordial as fern.
Or like that tree split at its base,
Covert for winter creatures and water-retreated life,
Tip with my boughs very serpent green,
Or in a grand spirit of play
Spurt water out of my nostrils.

Veins and gaddings of water
I have seen you in a silver fall
Shoot madness into a marble.
And ever the thud and pronk *of the pump*
Hee-haw and frog harrumph! That heave and rail
Of the mechanical works
That create the genius of water flowing...

To tread the crests of the fountains,
To walk on the foam of their flowers
Upthrust in a vertical climbing,
Spires of the falling and changing stuff

In a very ghost play of dance
Creating beyond their climbing
Caps of their vapor, a white turbulence
Of that which so changes beyond them
It is all sur-foam surf-combed,
It is got by the mathematics of climbing —
To reach by those aerobatics into white snows of the mounting —
There to dissolve into
What brings all the condensed fury of dews
Back down into descending.

To dance on those heavy heads of water
So richly and artfully sustained
By white prongs and tongues of the air
Curdling up liquid from nowhere,
The advance and the sword of a watery swirl
That is somehow compact with air,
Or to take from the whole lull
Of the deep music such a dream
As will not abandon flame,
To sink into the deep blown
Horn-called music and the wind —
Flung and cheek-puffed
Surge and hee-ho-hum of the thing...
Shagged eagles that do not spout
By fleur de lys, *all moss, that do,*
And the shafts then, and the boat-shaped urn —
Three kinds of shapes of water flowing
Across two kinds of spouts descending
And one out of the mouths of horned or big-eared animal gods.

A water-walk by all this bewildering
Fantasy of arising and falling flutes of the water,
Columned water adorned, making a gush and warble of sound.

II

Fountains, if to behold you
Were to have rain down over me
The least tendril and slightest shoot
Of your very white jubilation!
In the coils of your spirits be wound!
Or wrapped in your sleek skins
Mortality itself unfitted,
Made wild as it was, bound in rings
Of the lightly-springing-up streams
That go in a series of crystal hoops
And twenty such hoops you have,
Twenty wickets of running light
In glittering slivers of it
Set in an Alice *water-garden,*
Where the cultivation is water, not earth,
Stamens and stems of water stuff,
Emblems of water pouring from emblems.
Griffons that jut it, like merry she-gods
Winged at the back but firm fish-tailed
From whose breasts spurt the magnificent jets!

As I beheld you down levels of grass,
Throwing out the wild mists of forgetfulness,
Gashing down through the tender grace
Of a green confinement by slopes.
White channels were a most beautiful thing,
Channels, chalk white, in a sluice and spume,
Were a most beautiful, astonishing thing
Coursing with mad dog race down the grass
From one fountainous place to the next.

As I saw you in bird-frail seines
Down a green depth of height.
Sinews and locks fine as veils

Showing all green vegetation behind them,
Chains, flashing and weaving,
Strands as of links of snow,
Released and transformed into air.
Below, a deep chasm, all tangled abyss
Only a bird may sift, flying down the crevasse
For a sip from a luminous beam of water.

Are there not butterflies for these surf flowers?
To live by the balms of such vapors!
Do not tell me that one ever drowned
Lingering too long by the gust of some fountain,
Or that those twinkling in teams, parting and closing
The light dotted vanes of wings
Ever capsized, riding over a stream,
The way song soars and rides down a wind.

Fountains, our volatile kin,
Coursing as courses the blood
For we are more water than earth
And less of flesh than a flame
Bedded in air and run by the wind —
Bequeath me, be with me, endow my hunger
With sweet animal nature,
Knit me in with the plumes and the wands of your favor,
Get me great vistas, jade-milky streams
Where the source of the fury starts,
Winking up the last supper of light.
Get me chrysanthemums, great bulky heads
And a stem narrow as mercury
Fit to support a bluet.
And out of the reflections of water on stone
Let me count the great arcs,
The clusters rounded as grapes
Or staccato as needles
All that momentum kept firm

Propelled by the dry force of form —
To rest, momentarily at least
In the cataract of time —
Leaves for his feathers on the breast of an eagle,
Deep light of the long night and years!

III

In this tranquil life as belongs to windmills
Though the subtle day does not blow
But stands tranced in the wickets
And aspirations of water.
Descend by these paths, these perspectives,
This cascade of steps by the balustrades
Downgliding as if molded out of waves,
Into the white strata and springs
Of the founding place and wedding of waters.
But you must thrice interpret to know,
Mad on the waters, what they vow...
Listen. The fine battery of them.
Like a purification of sound
Blows their deep chanting,
That murmurous persisting.
No wilier song from the moon
Ever plunged into and took apart,
Dividing the plangent strands of it,
Such a fine cornucopia of bloom.

Like a low meditation on song
Before that song has begun,
This speech over you in a mesh,
This chain-mail of running light and of breath,
This tissue as if of sleep

That is so very lightly woven
The dream stares through with its Bacchic locks
Till your wear the very cloth of dream at last
Of figured and intertwined emblems.
Walks in long arches under it,
Portals through which if you go
You are beyond a world of woe
And into the white-woven web held fast.
But you must thrice interpret to tell
What is said by a flower in a spell,
Ascending the steps to the gods...

You may see them among the flowers
Standing small-headed, vast-eyed,
The grace of the broad breast turned,
A beardful of weeds and small ones
Lurked there by the marble-veined sides.

And I have gone the way of each sense
To dam up thirst or to stanch it.
There was a wild stream lashed to a tree
Gave out its oracular oratory.
By a flume came thrasonical volley
Boasting of love and struggle
Through watery walls blown asunder,
So light the small threads of structure,
By so many gadding ways of the senses
Harnassed to water, knowing what fire
Must make their divine toil turn wheels
For the relentless mills or wills,
I came from the watery furnaces.
From springs sealed of the sleep
Smoldering with what divinations
If such may arise and wake.

And meanwhile they stand there, they linger,
They recline, they preside, in langors or rigors,
Gods, our great friends of love and rage.
Passion stares into their empty eyes,
Want sees the calm sweet water coursing,
Artfully held in their mouths and pulsing,
Blind waters tranquilly stemming there.

DAVID WAGONER

THE FEAST

Maimed and enormous in the air,
The bird fell down to us and died.
Its eyelids were like cleats of fire,
And fire was pouring from its side.

Beneath the forest and the ash,
We stood and watched it. Beak to breast,
It floundered like a dying fish,
Beating its wings upon the dust.

What vague imbalance in our hearts
Leaned us together then? The frost
Came feathered from a sky of quartz;
Huge winter was our holy ghost.

O for light's sake, we turned to see
Waterglass forming on a stone;
A hag laughed under every tree;
The trees came slowly toppling down,

And all of the staring eyes were false.
Our jaws unhinged themselves, grew great,
And then we knelt like animals
To the body of this death, and ate.

ALL SOULS' DAY

An old, rich rain comes down
On the hummocks of the dead
And the side-slipped valley at dawn,

And all stones are one:
The rill-worn, pocked and angular
Moonlike rock on the wane

And the crushed shale
Are one in the rain that prays
Through land as a shell,

Through man, though dead,
Or climbing through the whole light,
Or still-born and ended

In a moment's nautilus,
Or afraid, or limp in the skull
And taken, raptly, at a loss,

Or through the crossed grass like fire,
That other water, or the vine
Mounting the spread fir,

Or, Saviour, the wilder flower,
Struck green beyond time and stamen,
Through flesh, through flare,

Or up the statued wind
Where the clouds stammer, naked,
Or flash to the light's wand

And sing, or through the curling,
Descending air come down to me,
Shut and starveling,

Here, through the stream at my lap,
Or the crescent glistening below my eyelid,
Or the cup at my lip,

Or through the loosening blood,
Rain, the rich same rain for man, for stone,
For the grass blade,

And for the banked sky and valley now,
For me. Water is one water,
And birth its litany.

THE HERO WITH ONE FACE

They chose me, not that I might learn,
But only because I was born,
And gave me amulets of clay,
Some armor, and a brief goodbye.

And at the threshold of the pool,
The looking-glass, the spoiled well,
The hole beneath the whirling tree,
I waited meekly. They called me.

I turned a corner, and was there,
Where all the other places are:
The other side of the cupped moon,
Oz, Heaven-Hell, and the Unknown.

I had too many purposes:
Although they hadn't said, « Find keys,
Find maidens, answers, and lost loves, »
I knew they wanted these themselves,

And I was bound to seek them all
Or be transformed, or die, or fall.
All the horned gods soared by and looked,
Hoping to stain my smallest act.

And there were beasts: three-headed dogs,
Gorgons, ghouls with whirligigs,
And dragons both alive and dead
For me to master, and I did.

I did, and O they brought Her in:
My Mother, the Queen upon a throne,
The Circe with a mouth to fill,
The Witch already beautiful.

How could I know Her without pain?
I turned: there sat the evil King,
Betrayer, jealous brother, God.
I loved him much more than I should.

Then Glory rattled from a cloud,
The deaf-and-dumb rose up and cried,
Cripples came striding, golden fleece
Fell from the holy air like lace,

And broken curses rained, and time
Gave birth, gave birth, and returned home
Where all of the unmade desires
Are made at last. And I felt worse,

And I was elected to a boon:
A final wish for every man.
I chose what I was told to choose.
They told me gently who I was.

It scarcely mattered, I lay down
And ate the lotos, kissed my crown,
And gazed at Ozma, Beatrice,
And sighed, and was content with this.

But no, — two-legged horses came,
Ogres, winds, and mothers-in-loam,
Provoked husbands with their wives,
Little people with long knives,

The shadows of the underworld;
And all my journey was recoiled,
Drawn back to the uneasy place
Where each benign beginning is.

Now, like Ulysses, master of
The world under, world above,
The world, between, — and one beyond
Which was not near enough to find —
I wait, and wonder what to learn.
O here, twice blind at being born.

PART SONG

So cool, so clear at noon.
The water moves along,
Loitering in its pools
Like the bequeathed air
In rooms where wind has gone.

The curved grass leans down
And wavers in the verge,
As lithe as blown tendrils,
And, uncertain, water spills
Over the turned stone.

What am I now? Between
My hands the light lies bare
Or goes, as the wind goes,
Into pools, — or bending, trails
In water like a fin,

Or vanishing, moves on
To gather grass, to pose,
There, where the streams soon merge.
What was I once? Among
The eddies, stones lie clean.

The spray sails like a rain
And vanishes. The moss
Grows darker than my eyes.
O what will I be? The pools
Lie still in the still noon.

THE FALLEN

At scaling dark, we stood
Still upon pliant bones.
Comfort came, and stayed.
The faces on our loins
Shifted, took their ease
So lightly, we could smile
To touch them and to kiss.
The pond of flesh lay still.

But at near dark, what rang
Around us like a choir
Grown violent with its song?
The people on the stair,
The rooms beneath the floor
Cried cadence, and we wept.
Our shadows took the air.
The womb in the mirror gaped.

Then, at entire dark,
Everything ceased. Each hid
His Nothing behind his back;
The impenetrable eyelid
Wavered and came down,
And dangling from mouth to mouth,
The ancient ghosts streamed in
To ravel strife and breath.

Our plural chaos now
Turns upon silences,
Is swirled about a slow
Center, and damned thus.
O daylight was our own,
But these are the states of night:
From ease, to the crying-down,
Then vacancy outright.

GEORGE STEINER

THE DEEPS OF THE SEA

I

The deeps of the sea were driving Mr. Aaron Tefft to the brink of insanity. On the marine charts papering the walls of his study in Salem, the deeps were marked in tints of mounting stridence, from the quiet blue star encircling Sigsbee Deep, a mere 12,425 feet beneath the Gulf of Mexico to the blood-red figure out of the cabala which circumscribed the world's abyss, the centre of Mr. Tefft's nightmares, Mindanao Deep, 35,400 feet below the glint of the sun. Not that Mr. Tefft looked often at the map on which this final pit was so manifestly charted. His brain reeled at the thought of that funnel of night in which Everest would pass unnoticed, its snow plume choked six thousand feet under the silence of the sea.

But the bare certainty that Mindanao Deep exists, that its walls of water spin with the diurnal wandering of the earth, clutched at Mr. Tefft's heart and compelled him, now and again, to leap up from his frayed leather chair and face the east wall on which he had fixed his maps of the Pacific. And even if twilight in the room, or the hot reflection of the western sun blurred the details, he knew where Mindanao Deep was and could glimpse above it the purple square

marking Ramapo Deep, 34,626 feet of typhoon-familiar sea plunging into a sudden darkness off Japan. To Mr. Tefft's perturbed imaginings, Magellan's peaceful ocean disguised the several openings of Hell — Nero Deep off Guam, Aldrich Deep windward from Kermadek Island, the Milwaukee Depth a chasm out-measuring the Himalayas.

To Mr. Tefft's mind there was no such thing as an unexplained marine disaster. Why had the *Cyclops* never been heard of after she left Barbados on March the 4th, 1918? Simply because somewhere in her path lurked an undiscovered deep out of which there had risen a quick stirring, a hunger in the maelstrom, sucking the vessel into darkness. First the *Cyclops* had passed through the region where the light of the sun still penetrates, a dim soft blue; then into the green jungles where the barracudas hunt; deeper yet where absolute night begins and the inhuman cold, but where luminescent rays throw their darts of fire; finally into the unknown where after centuries of dissolution armadas become dust.

But when his imagination drew near that latter region Mr. Tefft would be seized with a violent tremor and would walk to his window, staring into his garden and fixing his dazzled senses onto the lime tree or Katherine Tefft's straw bonnet until, as if drawn by his wild gaze, she would turn about in her wicker chair, smile towards him and say, « Are you all right, Aaron? Come down and sit by me, my dear. »

Mr. Tefft's obsession had a precise form. He was terrorised and haunted by the fear that he would be buried at sea and swept into one of the great deeps by the ocean currents whose paths he knew with exactitude. With each year of service on the bridge of merchant ships and ocean liners, Mr. Tefft's knowledge of these currents grew subtler and his conviction that each dead thing floating somewhere in the sea would ultimately be sucked into one of the chasms more firm. Let a man be cast onto the waters even in the shallower reaches of the Atlantic — his body would drift into one of the currents and be borne towards Bermuda and Nares Deep or east of the Azores to Monaco Deep. There was no escaping

it. A man must be buried on land. Otherwise the seas shall suck him to their centre and his journey will be more terrifying than any pilgrimage across the floors of Hell. That journey burned in Mr. Tefft's mind with such material intensity that it had brought a curious light into his eyes and had charred the edges of his soul.

He could remember when the hallucination had first mastered him. It was a night of clamorous south-west gales, after it had been decided in the downstairs parlour that young Aaron would be apprenticed as cabin boy on a Blue Star liner. He had put the blankets over his head to shut out the storm and then he rolled himself tighter and tighter into the darkness until his feet touched the end of the bed and a drowsy warmth enclosed him. It was then that the nightmare came upon him for the first time, the dread sense of suffocation, of being drawn to some hungry centre by a vast undertow. He recalled the struggle for breath, the mad sense of entanglement and, at last, after what seemed an age of pent-up anguish, the burst into the cold of the night. Aaron had rushed to the window and looked at the sea charging inland. But the old acquaintance was gone, shattered. Somewhere beneath its familiar surface lay the deeps, waiting for his carcass, ready to fill his mouth and nostrils with their masses of water before his soul could find its exit. But it was too late for Master Tefft to draw back from his destined profession.

That was some thirty years ago. With each year of service the terror had grow more insidious. But the sea was Mr. Tefft's calling and after his holidays spent with Katherine in Salem it drew him as surely as it drew the rivers. Curiously, moreover, at sea the nightmare seemed less frequent. It was in his house that it cried havoc.

It always began in the same manner: Mr. Aaron Tefft, First Mate on the *Hibernia,* was stricken by a tropical disease. After a few nights in the sick bay, under the blue lamps and the whirring fan, the First Mate died. Because his disease was infectious and as the nights were dangerously hot, the

Captain and the chief medical officer decided to bury Mr. Tefft at sea. The sailors were lined up and the chaplain intoned that splendid litany for the dead. Then the coffin was lifted above the railing, the Master at Arms seized a corner of the flag and gave the command. Down slid the mortal remains of Mr. Aaron Tefft. The coffin struck water with a gash of spray, was drawn momentarily towards the propellers of the receding ship and then floated below the surface on the start of its great voyage.

The prelude was gentle: a few hundred feet under the waves there is still light. Storms are heard and the bright stars leave a shimmering trace. Life is multitudinous: cod, tuna and blue marlin turn about the coffin and brush it with their fins. Portuguese men-of-war sail past in trasparent armadas, and sea-flowers, green, mauve and smouldering red deck the coffin in ceremonious grief. It is a region where earthly life has its soft echoes: passing liners leave a taste of oil and the pounding of their engines beats as a dim gong. Debris cast overboard sinks by encrusted with stars of salt and when the fish dart downward, the cry of a gull shrills after them.

But after a few weeks, the coffin becomes water-logged, riddled with sea-worms and top-heavy. Then it begins its descent into the depths and with it Mr. Tefft's nightmare becomes more ominous. The sea turns to ink: hammer-heads roll their protruding eyes and the sword-fish penetrate the lid of the coffin and stab at Mr. Tefft's affrighted bones. Albacores and bonnet-head sharks sharpen their teeth on the decaying wood and as it sinks yet deeper, leviathans nudge it with their lazy humps.

Then the coffin breaks open and out tumbles Mr. Tefft. Instead of sinking to the bottom and the oblivion of the sand, he is captured by a passing current and driven towards one of the deeps. Struggle as he may, Mr. Tefft cannot awake. The dream holds him with obsessive power. The current becomes swifter as it nears the rim of the abyss. Great fish struggle to escape the suction and the sea jungles are bent in the direction of the deep as by a perpetual hurricane. Now

he is only seconds from the plunge. Already he can make out the jagged line where the floor of the ocean opens. On the brink a giant squid is fighting. Some of its venomous arms have already been sucked over the edge, but the others are gripping on and trying to cast anchor. Above them the great eyes of the brute spin wearily, but already it is toppling into the abyss.

As Mr. Tefft speeds towards loud oblivion, all his drugged senses struggle to awake. But before they can break the nauseous spell, his dreaming mind glimpses the deep. It is a brief but terrible vision: the dark is so absolute that it illumines, the cold is so intense that it burns. Monstrous beasts, blind titans and the legions of the drowned are hurled downward, and although Mr. Tefft is beginning to awake, some part of him, some fragment of that which gives a man joy of life, is left behind.

Such was his recurrent nightmare. And with time he grew convinced that it was no mere fantasm of his disturbed brain, but reality and sober appraisal of what happened to those damned souls sepulchered in the oceans.

II

But only in two ways did Mr. Tefft betray to the outside world that he possessed some private vision. In all his contracts with successive shipping lines he insisted upon a clause stating that under no circumstances whatever would he be buried at sea. He declared himself ready to provide money for a first-class, airtight coffin and saw to it that the ship's hospital carried plenty of disinfectant. All employers under whom Mr. Tefft served would be compelled to put in writing their assurance that in the event of demise his remains would be returned to dry land. Throughout the merchant service this request

Aaron, and let us see who shall endure! »

The second clue of his special insight into the deeps of the sea was his will — a document drawn up many years

before with the aid of Mr. Horace Brindle, an old friend of the family and a good lawyer.

Mr. Tefft's fortune was considerable, inherited in part from his fathers with their interests on the high seas and in the inland textile mills. A good deal of it had gone into the Tefft house, a spacious, hoary structure shaped by generations of gales. It was a fine house, alive to the equinoctial changes and the phases of the moon, moaning in its odorous loft even before the October storms had ridden Cape Ann, distending its rafters before the halcyon had, in fact, built a nest in the Sargasso Sea.

The house was full of nooks and labyrinths, with small flights of stairs leading to corridors and rummage rooms which spilled over with maps, old brass fixtures and sermons bound in faded morocco. There were two silver tankards in the master bedroom reputed to bear Revere's mark and on the main stairs hung a clouded mirror, clasped by an eagle and embossed with stars. Mr. Brindle judged it a rare piece of « early Patriotic work. » In front of the house was a small garden, Katherine Tefft's favourite domain. In it were an old lime tree, a laburnum hedge and blackberry bushes. At the western angle stood a stone pillar with a mottled cannon ball on top of it. Neither Mr. Tefft nor Mr. Brindle, the prince of local antiquarians, knew whence it came. Katherine's view that it was the petrified cranium of one of Aaron's more austere forefathers elicited from her husband merely a shrug of distaste.

Mr. Tefft had drawn up his will shortly after his return from a voyage that took him from the Sunda Islands and through the lone Carolines to Guam. It declared that all of his wordly possessions were to belong to Katherine Langley Tefft, his lawfully wedded spouse — but only when and if the mortal remains of her husband had been buried in firm ground. Should this condition be dishonoured in any way or manner, all the property was to go to a charitable institution.

For a long time Mr. Tefft had hesitated over which of the many deserving causes he knew of should benefit in the

event of Katherine's negligence. Mr. Brindle had, in turn, suggested to his client a home for retired law clerks, a school for orphans of men lost at sea, and a small mill staffed by young ladies rescued from Satan. Mr. Tefft had expressed courteous interest and given small donations, but it was only after a typhoon had driven his impotent ship through the Djailoto Passage and into the roaring blackness of the Pacific, that he discovered precisely which charity would benefit from his burial at sea.

It was a home for the deaf and dumb a few miles from Gloucester. In its white-washed rooms, with their chintz and flower pots, Mr. Tefft found an oasis remote from his nightmare. The deaf could not hear the oceans rushing to the deeps nor the dumb utter their horror at the thought. So Mr. Tefft often visited the home, sat with its softly blinking inmates and poured out his visions to them. They would listen, nodding and smiling at the mere presence of this tall gentleman who came with baskets of fruit and addressed their silence with such seriousness. After having spoken his piece, Mr. Tefft would feel less afraid. Yes, either his fortune would be Katherine's or — if by some dread negligence he fell a prey to the deeps — it would profit these men and women over whose brains the sea had no spell.

Mr. Brindle duly drafted the will. But on reflection, a difficulty arose in his mind. When his client returned from his next voyage, through the Andaman Sea with its lazy water-snakes, he asked him to come around to the office.

« My dear Aaron, » began the lawyer after having admired a small jade figure which Mr. Tefft had acquired in Akyab, « my dear Aaron, there is an oversight in your will and it threatens Katherine with a grave injustice. » Mr. Tefft looked at him inquiringly. « Well, let us suppose that through some marine tragedy or act of war your entire ship went down! There is then no way in which your afflicted widow could satisfy the condition you have imposed. That, surely, is inadmissible and, believe me, your will would be broken by

any court in the land. » Mr. Brindle sat back with a certai air of pleasure at his acuity.

Mr. Tefft was visibly disturbed. « You are thinking of th *Titanic*? » he demanded. « Not only of her, Aaron, but o any number of ships that have gone down with their crews In fact, » and here Mr. Brindle positively smiled, « in fact I can even think of a case in which the vessel has been foun but the crew had vanished. » « Ah, the *Marie Céleste*, » sai Mr. Tefft with a pained expression. « Yes, yes I grant you tha one, Horace. It makes no sense, does it? I've puzzled m brains over it often. I wonder whether there was not som mad man on board, some inspired lunatic who mesmerise the passengers and crew, who persuaded them to abando ship in the face of some imaginary peril. » « That may be shrewd guess, » said Mr. Brindle, « but it does not resolv our present difficulty. » Mr. Tefft promised to give it earnes thought and left. Mr. Brindle could hear his steps retreatin down the windy street. He rubbed his small hands and pu away Starr's *Manual of Marine Law and Insurance.*

Brindle was right. Mr. Tefft admitted as much to himsel Even modern ships foundered in typhoons, struck icebergs o collided in impenetrable fog. Walking homeward, Mr. Teff added the possibility that he would go down with an entir ship to the index of his fears. No time for coffins then, onl the great list and shudder that hulls suffer when a vesse surrenders to the sea. Then the water coming in the funnel and the vast iron grave nosing down, with her company, a are the centurions of Pompeii, in attitudes of duty. It wa conceivable that the sheer tonnage of the ship would, for long time, anchor it to the sea-floor. The chronometers woul mark time for months to come and as the locks weakene on the galleys, bottles of port and burgundy would float int the green world. Moreover, and this point held Mr. Tefft' attention, when the time came for the crew to abandon shi in the true sense, when the woodwork had dissolved and th forests of barnacles and polyps bloomed in the state-room surely things would proceed in orderly fashion.

No decent Captain would let his men stumble out chaotically. Discipline runs deeper than salt water. The crew would go forth in order of rank. And although the thought of being drawn towards the nearest deep in company with his Captain and shipmates terrified Mr. Tefft, it seemed to him far less terrible than the vision of journeying to Hell in solitude. Yes, Brindle had hit on something, and though he might not know it, it was more than a legal quibble. It was a source of hope and comfort to his client. Should the *Hibernia* sink, her First Mate would play the man and go before the Second Mate even into Mindanao Deep.

Mr. Tefft hastened to retrace his steps. « All right, Horace, » he said, « let my will state unequivocally that if I am lost with an entire ship or with some substantial part of its crew, then Katherine may inherit. Only if I should die alone must she see to it that I am buried in a cemetery. » Mr. Brindle nodded approvingly.

III

At first encounter, Mr. Tefft had liked John Talford. Later on he remembered that summer afternoon on which the architect had come to tea and had been introduced by Katherine as « Mr. Talford, fresh out of Harvard, and building some of his first houses hereabouts. » The young man had gone quite red, had bowed and had not known where to put his new straw hat. Mr. Tefft had liked this gaucherie in him and the unfeigned interest he had evinced in the old house and the maps on which each successive voyage had been inscribed. If he remembered rightly, that first tea took place after a particularly romantic spell of duty.

Mr. Tefft was with a tanker fleet at that time and had been through the Suez Canal, along the spice coasts and into the Indian Ocean. The *River Rouge* had been caught by a near-hurricane in the Strait of Malacca, had met the late winter gales in the South China Seas and had finally reached

Valparaiso like a battered sheep-dog parted from his flock. He remembered how Talford had listened to his tales, closely and intelligently, and how he had diffidently misquoted Othello to say that it must be fine to have such stories to recount to a lovely woman. And his bow to Katherine had been so stiff and boyish that Mr. Tefft had felt old age steal over him all at once.

John Talford settled down near Marblehead and, imperceptibly, became a part of the Tefft household. The young man had little money of his own and Aaron was only too ready to offer him the run of his house and garden during week-ends and the drowsy summer months. Talford would arrive, leaping over the hedge with his shabby suitcase and invariable butterfly net, and settle down like a cat, familiar yet independent. After supper, when the mosquitoes sang around the storm lamps, he would play chess with Aaron or draw out of him stories of strange fish glimpsed in the Sunda Seas, or make his host say once again why the South Atlantic is the loneliest quarter of the earth. And Katherine would sit in her rocking chair and fix her large eyes on the boy's head. Like Aaron, she looked forward to Talford's visits.

When he was away on his months-long trips, moreover, Mr. Tefft treasured the thought that Katherine would be less lonely and that she had someone to invite other than old Horace and the grey ladies from the neighbourhood. He realised that some people might gossip; around Salem that was unavoidable. But it did not trouble him and he presumed that Katherine would be jealous of proprieties. That was why Brindle's post-script to a letter waiting for Aaron in Singapore nettled him and stuck in his mind. It said simply that he — Brindle — was a man of large views, but did not Aaron think it careless of Katherine to travel in young Talford's company? The very next letter from his wife cleared up the matter; she had merely gone to a fine arts exhibition in Boston and the architect had insisted on escorting her. Nevertheless, Aaron wrote delicately but firmly intimating that she must be careful.

But when he returned to Salem, he asked Talford to come as often as he wished. The young man's nimble imagination fascinated him. Suddenly, one blazing afternoon, when they were close-gathered in the shade of the lime tree, he sat up on the grass and said: « I wonder what a man of my profession might learn from plumbing the sea! » « What are you driving at? » asked Mr. Tefft, drawing on one of the fine pipes he had brought from Java. « All those splendid legends of sunken cities and towers, » urged Talford. « I've been cramming up on them. Cantreus in Cardigan Bay, the City of Ys, Tintagel, the Land of Lyonesse, the Ile Verte, Atlantis — all those legendary citadels sunk beneath the waves. There must be something in it, you know! Some actual remembrance of a kingdom, full of golden places, reaching from Ireland to the Azores and engulfed in some great burst of ocean. »

Mr. Tefft watched a trail of bluish smoke and nodded. « Yes, John, I think there is something in it. Sailors along those western European coasts will tell you that on clear days, at the hour of the Angelus, you can hear bells chiming from sunken steeples. And once, when we were near the Cap Verde islands, on a truly pellucid night, I saw what seemed like lights glimmering below us in the sea. The pilot said it was a sunken city reflecting moonlight in its glass and marble. I think it may have been a shoal of luminescent eels. But I am not certain. » Talford hunched forward, wiping perspiration from his eyes. He said, « Oh yes, there must be something in it! »

Katherine turned towards him from under her parasol and asked: « What would you be looking for, John? » « I don't really know, » he conceded. « Perhaps some magnificent style of architecture unknown to our learned academics. Some style massive as Karnak, yet building with light and not against it, with air and not around it. Perhaps there were master builders in the lost Atlantis, stylists linking, like their engulfed kingdom, the pillars of Ionia and the pyramids of the Toltecs. What a fashion I could launch! Build your houses

in Atlantian style! Mr. John Talford, sole begetter! » And he drew his head back and laughed till the others joined in.

Katherine smoothed her dress and asked: « Do you think there are sunken treasures in those places? » « Who knows? » said Aaron, shielding his eyes against the light. « Fishermen have brought up ancient tools and bracelets from the Dogger Banks and there are tales of Portuguese trawlers hauling up ancient gold marked in a language no one has deciphered. » « Ah, that's for me, » said Talford with sudden intensity. « That's what I need! A catch of sunken treasure! It's no good being poor and young all at once. You work all the days of your youth building stupid little houses to other men's orders and when you have scraped together enough to be your own master — why old age is upon you and the joy of it is stale! Yes, lead me to that sunken wealth and I shall dive for it like a cormorant and haul it up with my teeth! »

Aaron looked at the architect uneasily and Mrs. Tefft bent towards the young man: « John, » she said, « you must make a rich marriage. » « Ah, Katherine, do not urge me to do that! » His eyes met hers full on, and Aaron Tefft saw the remote, cold brilliance in them. His pipe had gone out and his hand fumbled as he sought to light it again. But already Talford had jumped to his feet, stretched his gangly arms and stepped into the sunlight. « Anyway, » he drawled, « there may be no treasures at the bottom of the sea, but there are some fine butterflies in that meadow. Care to join me? » « No, » said Katherine, « it's too hot for a woman of my age to go galavanting through the fields. But run along and be sure to be on time for supper. » The architect waved to them from beyond the garden as she remarked: « What a joy he is, Aaron. You liked him from the first. You have good taste, my dear. » And she placed her hands on his knee.

« I did not know he was so eager to get rich, » observed Mr. Tefft. « Ah but he is, Aaron. It would allow him to see the world and build the things he dreams of. I wish that I could help him. People like ourselves salt money away as if it was pork. John would spend it! Spend it gloriously! Oh

I can see him now, riding through the streets of Rome in his own carriage. There are people born to turn dead money into sheer delight and they are usually the ones that have none. Take me, Aaron. God knows I don't spend much or beautifully. But without our money I would be miserable. I would become a hateful old woman. But when I have it, what good does it do? John could show me all the wonders that it brings. » She was staring into the distance, towards the meadow where Talford and his net could be seen moving like a speck of glass in the bright sun.

Aaron followed her glance. « Yes, » he confessed, « John could show you all the wonders. But there wouldn't be anything left. All squandered, all the labour gone! » « Oh Aaron, » she countered with a flash of anger, « whom should we leave it to? You gave me no children! » He rose and walked away from her. She had not thrown that at him in years. It was true, but he had long believed that she was resigned to it. But once more her voice rang hot: « Whom are you saving it for? You will roam the seas till you are an old man, Aaron. I cannot hold you back. At night I feel the tides drawing you away from me. Ah how I hate that sea of yours! I hate it, Aaron Tefft! I hate it! »

When she spoke again she was near his elbow. « I am sorry, my dear. These are things that need not be said any more. I lost my head, I'm afraid. It is so hot out here. Please, let us go into the house. » She drew him by the arm and as they stepped into the chill parlour he had to lean on her for guidance, so sudden was the dark. But from far away came Talford's voice; he was singing in a high tenor, singing and striding through the fields in defiance of noon.

IV

That day's breach widened. Aaron Tefft had always realised, in a blurred and distant way, that in the event of his death Katherine would probably marry again. She was younger

than he, and dimly he thought it right. But it angered him that she would pick a man to whom the depths of the sea were not a place of terror but a kind of museum, replete with inspiring ruins and hordes of fairy gold. In all these years, he reflected, he had conveyed nothing to her of the vision that consumed his soul. Only a sense of remoteness and absence. His nightmare had left him a stranger not only to himself but to those nearest him, to Horace Brindle who considered him daft, and now to Katherine. John Talford had made him a stranger to his own house, and beneath a placid mien, Aaron Tefft began nursing jealousy and detestation.

He bade Katherine farewell before setting out on his next voyage. « I trust you will not see too much of Talford. I hate gossip. » Katherine looked at him quickly: « You need not worry, Aaron. You have no grounds for jealousy. » He snatched at the word. « Yes, I am jealous! Why should I be ashamed of it? He's young and attractive and is near you when I am far away. And between us there is, of late, so much silence. » « Of late? » challenged Katherine. « Have you not heard it before? Or is it that the sea is always pouring down your ears? » Aaron stared at her: « Why do you say that? What do you mean by it, Katherine? » « Oh, Aaron, I've slept by you many and many a night and heard all of the Atlantic roaring between us! » « That is not my fault. Believe me, people who get their living from the sea bring a bit of it with them, even when they are far inland. » « Ah yes, » she retorted with a laugh, « I know that's what the poets say. You are like those shells we used to pick up as children. Put your ear to them in the midst of the Sahara and you will hear the tide. But there is no echo in those shells, Aaron! There is no echo, and it is hard to live without one. It is especially hard for a woman. » He turned away and asked flatly: « Will you be seeing Talford? » « I may. » « Don't, Katherine. I ask you not to. I have a right to ask that. » « You have a right to ask very little, Aaron. Leave me in peace. I shall not bring disgrace on your fine name. » She threw the promise at him. And then it sprang out of him,

meanly: « I know you, Katherine. You won't have Talford or anyone else that's poor. You'll have to wait until I'm dead and buried. You'll just have to wait, my girl! » She turned on him: « Aaron Tefft, this is the first time in my life — I swear it — that I have hoped I shall not wait too long. » And she left the room.

On his way to New York, Mr. Tefft made a point of visiting the home for the deaf and dumb. He was joyously received and sat down among his friends. He spoke to them softly and they watched his lips like a chorus of conspirators. He begged them to keep watch over his house, told them of his hatred of Talford and of his certainty that there was a world of merry noises between the architect and Katherine — noises he could not hear for having so much ocean in his brain and that they could not perceive for being deaf. Ah, but he would keep her to the trust! She would not dare relinquish him to the deeps of the sea. And the patients huddled around him and pressed their moist palms in his hand.

On his voyage the image of Katherine obsessed him. Because another man found her desirable, Aaron lamented the lost years at sea, the nights in which he had brooded over his charts instead of being with her. He had a young man's warm dreams and despised himself. Mrs. Tefft's letters were in the old style, gay and courteous. She wrote simply that Mr. Talford had proposed alterations for the house and would be pleased to submit his drawings to Aaron when the latter came home. This put Aaron Tefft in a state of frenzy. For he could imagine them exploring the house together, tearing it down in their impatient minds, mutilating the things he treasured.

When the *Hibernia* docked in Halifax, her First Mate asked to be allowed immediate leave instead of completing the voyage back to New York. He did not know exactly what he feared, but the compulsion to reach Salem drove him. He laughed like a rescued child at the mere sight of his house and stood before it in the twilight staring, gathering in each familiar detail. He entered and his eyes struck the antique

mirror. In one corner of it, distorted but unmistakable, he glimpsed two figures drawing swiftly apart. Immediately thereupon Katherine's voice hurried towards him: « Aaron! I didn't expect you. What a magnificent surprise! » « Yes, I suppose it is, » said Aaron fascinated by his own calm. Talford stood in the door for a moment, then advanced his hand outstretched: « It's good to see you, Sir. I was impatient to show you some of the plans we've made for the house. » Aaron Tefft stared at him as if the architect were babbling in some remote tongue. « Come, » urged Katherine, « take your things off. I shall have supper ready in no time. »

After Talford had gone, Aaron went to his study. He remembered some French joke about cuckolds coming home from a long voyage. It had been told him by a petty officer in Brest many years ago. He heard himself laughing at it, but his voice was so loud and alien that he grew afraid. Katherine too must have heard it, for she knocked on his door and entered before he could answer. « Don't sit up tonight, Aaron. You will make yourself ill staring at those maps. » He drew away feeling her hands on his shoulders. « Ah, » she said, « I know why you hurried down from Halifax. I know what you are thinking. » Someone whose calm seemed remote from him and rather terrible was saying, « Is it true, Katherine? »

« Would you really care? » she countered after a moment of silence. « More than I dare admit, even to myself. » She heard the pain in him: « I am sorry it should hurt you so, Aaron, for had it been true it would really have been the least of what is wrong between us. »

He leaped up. « How can you stand there talking about it in nicely turned phrases? How dare you stand there and deny to my face that you are Talford's mistress? Have you no shame left, Katherine? » « Aaron, » and her voice seemed doubly quiet after his shouting, « perhaps I do have little shame left. For if I did, and if I was not an avaricious, spoiled woman, I would have married John before now. As is, I have not even become his mistress. » « You expect me to believe that, » he demanded. « I thought you would be intelligent

enough to see it for yourself. » And then she smiled strangely and added, « But I am grown such a stranger to you that you no longer know anything about me. »

Her calm inflamed him: « Katherine you are lying! You are trying to make a damn fool of me! I saw you! In the name of God, I saw you! » « What did you see, Aaron? Two people on a settee looking at a blueprint! You are blind, Aaron Tefft! How could you see? » As he struck her he felt the edge of a tooth against his knuckles. She brought her hand to her mouth and stared at him, uncomprehending.

« You are unhappy, Aaron. You will drive yourself mad. But let me warn you. Hang on, hang on to your senses and to your health. For I am waiting to be rich and free. Free, Aaron, free to go inland, to tear down this house, to go a thousand miles from the smell of the sea, to go where there is wheat and dust enough to choke the wind. So hang on, Aaron, and let us see who shall endure! »

V

But hanging on proved difficult. He could read the patience in her eyes, and the tenacity. He wrote to his employers pleading illness and too a leave of absence until the following spring. Katherine travelled to Boston with him and spent lavishly. A new life was burning in her and she seemed to grow younger. One February morning he saw her dancing in the garden, her fine rich hair unbound. She threw her arms high and called to him: « Come dance with me, Aaron! I shall bewitch this lime tree and it will bear gold. »

He sought to restore at least the old neutrality. But she was too alive and what drew near her seemed to kindle into a new radiance. « Katherine, » he pleaded, « let us try and come to an understanding. I was wrong to mistrust you. I know that now. » « You were not wrong, Aaron, but what does it matter? It is too late for the two of us. Let us live our lives,

each in our own way. » And she bought jewels and wore bracelets on her strong arms.

Aaron felt his own vitality ebbing in the struggle and resolved to return to the *Hibernia*. He was to join her in San Francisco on the spring cruise which took her to Hawaii and Japan. On the long train journey across the United States, and in his quarters on board ship, the image of Katherine, as he had last seen her, haunted him. She was standing on the porch, in her great sun-hat, waving to him. But she was actually looking past him, far beyond his own receding figure. He had said, « Goodbye, Katherine, keep well. » And she had said, « Oh I shall, Aaron, I shall, and I want you to do the same. The sea is full of shoals. » And he had come back to ask, « Will I find you here when I return? » « I shall be here, Aaron, but only you can tell whether you will find me. »

In his heart, Aaron Tefft believed that she loved Talford and that they were waiting for him to die. Their own vitality was sapping him. It was an unequal contest for the deeps of the sea were drawing at his strength. He raged at the thought of their impatience and even if they were innocent in flesh, he knew that they had made love in their hearts and had lain together, mind to mind. It drove him mad to think on it. It drained him of all feeling save a desire to thwart them, to undo their bright expectations.

In Honolulu, Mr. Tefft got ferociously drunk and tore up and down the beach in the moonlight, driven in a donkey-cart by a young woman in a yellow chemise. But neither the night air, nor the witches' sabbath that followed — when the First Mate of the *Hibernia* pranced up the brothel stairs holding a bit in his mouth — brought him relief. What kept him alive now was the thought of the future Mr. and Mrs. Talford tearing down his house, selling his charts and travelling westward, into some landstrangled place like Kansas to spawn their happy brood. He would defeat them yet, and it filled him with rapture to think of Brindle reading the will and of Katherine being evicted by a patient procession of the dea and the dumb. Then let Talford woo her! Katherine would

turn mean without money, mean and old. Yes, he would defeat them! And through the irridescent night of the mid-Pacific, the *Hibernia* steamed towards Japan.

Mr. Tefft was no longer afraid, only desperately tired. His life's great nightmare and recent hatred had gutted him. Now he was like an empty shell, its windows staring into blank air. He stood on the bridge and let the waters dazzle him. That night, the *Hibernia* would pass Ramapo Deep. Reflecting on it, Mr. Tefft had made what seemed to him an odd discovery: in Latin the word *altus* signified both high and deep. It described Everest as well as the great chasm off Japan. Perhaps, in some transcendent way, vastly beyond his numbed imagining, the two dimensions were the same, or were only infinitesimally apart when measured on a greater plumb line. The deeps of the sea were mountain summits reversed. Make the earth smooth again and they would vanish. Aaron Tefft treasured the thought and waited for night.

It was near on one in the morning when he went topside. The *Hibernia* was steaming under her blue lights and the sea was like incandescent velvet. When he peered into it, Mr. Tefft could perceive the image of the stars, and beneath them yet other stars. And looking upwards, he could not distinguish between the real stars and their images. The night world was like a turning mirror, reality sometimes beneath and sometimes above the muffled pounding of the ship. He checked his watch and glanced at the bridge to make certain that the Second Mate was at his station. Now the stars hung so low and brilliant that the water seemed to burn at the horizon. *Altus* could describe the deeps of the sea — and the most distant constellations.

Mr. Aaron Tefft walked swiftly towards the railing.

WALTER KERELL

POEM

I

Thirty turnings cross the indifferent air
This day, this fragile day,
Yet whatever flower blossomed
In yesterday's spring
No headlong perfume but in Christ's mouth increases,
Revivifying the pallid air
Thirsty Furies suck at
To take away what is mine.

Shattered bridges are flaming in my sunset-shadow;
Tattered windmills are bleeding from every pocket
Of the succulent wind—

Bear down, bear down, beware—

Faces die as the wheels turn,
As the shaggy bridges fall,
I wheeling confuse the earth and sky
Christ and then Peter knew,
Struck tongue's sanctity;
Mine wags to all the winds
Tasting, hoping,
Tasting, hoping.

II

Charms rot in Time's spitoon;
Rigor lets them go—
Jew's rigorous bood can deny
All but the lost faith,
And the first homecoming—

Here on this stricken, allegorical plain,
The present, upon-us fragile day
I wander, scion
Of ignorance and human waste
Seeking, hoping
Seeking, hoping.

III

One head and head of hair lie on Time's bundle
Night after night,
A memory I have earned;
Her delicate hands preach reason
And teach charity,
Impel to love,
Engage all Angel's wings,
Their similitude,
To hover not so distantly
Out of tongue's reach.

O scoop me out of Time's pot,
Run me into Time's penitential fire
Dear hands that cannot rest
And I cannot hold —
Lynn, Caroline, my lady,
Because I let you go,
Because I set you free

In my most destitute day
Make real to me, my love,
Mediterranean dream,
Christian A G A P É.

THE POET RETURNS TO NEW YORK

Day-breezes over the rock-bound shore
Recite my heart's impotence
And web sagas I cannot
Sing

Nor can I, I cannot sing

Bird-cries lunge into a leaden wall
And break in anguish
I invent
But go on ringing
There is no wall for such cries

No wall, their cries go on
They go on singing

Simple sunlight and the day-breezes
Spin round this city's towers
And warm a mummy's face
And lift a ghost's hat
Air and light distorting

As if —
As if Purgatorial penance
Was here exacted on the spot...

The isolated heart in this field of blasted light
Prays for bird-wing's rushing

It finds no patience
For tomorrow's human touch

Today denies
What yesterday disjoined
Tomorrow and its images

Today has passed beyond
The heart's capacity
To love, today —

O may tomorrow mate
Eyes and limbs
And simple words
Bird's wings and bird-cries
Warm air and kind light
To this city of stone and steel.

GAMEL WOOLSEY

THE SEARCH FOR DEMETER

I

She who is Demeter
and is Ceres,
she who rises in the golden corn,
who has her house at Enna,
above that lake,
where once Persephone,
gathering new flowers —
Koré the Maiden still —
was wrapt away...
Tell me,
O myth, O memory, tell me:
How was Koré lost?
By Enna's lake
Pluto is always waiting;
there his dark chariot
cleaves the earth,
bearing all down;
and summers are all done,
and no Springs break.

Ceres-Demeter,
Earth that gives the harvest,

Goddess of life and death,
life of the grain,

Mother
Hear us!

II

I am lost, as Persephone,
but yet remembering
I have been Koré.
Now in these hollow shades
Demeter seeks her daughter,
and can not find her;
and I am seeking Demeter,
and can not find her.
For lack of her
the flowers wither
and the harvest fails;
the drought goes on
beneath the harsh thunder,
and the dry clouds
can not give us rain.

III

In the middle years of my age,
when I first knew I was no longer young
I found I had committed all the sins,
named in old churches,
carved on the brown board
in golden letters.
I had not committed them
to outward view:
all sins are committed in the heart.

Yet there were no new sins,
no acts of sin, for me to do.
I had committed the undone and the unsaid,
and the neglecting and forgetting,
and the betrayals
and no-sayings;
besides the minuscule and minute
sins which pass unnoticed, but afterwards,
like a mote in a blinded eye,
cover up the world.

In that most bitter year of my life,
walking in the cold winter
in the bleak North,
nursing a new grief
at my barren breast,
suddenly I saw them,
dark against the sky,
those hideous shapes
that haunt me now always.
Then I said:
I will flee from them, anywhere,
I will go South, to Sicily,
to Demeter's land,
I will seek her there.

IV

Down the coasts of Calabria,
shore upon shore —
Orestes, fleeing from the Furies,
came this way.
Fleeing faster
in this lurch and rattle,
still thin fierce voices whisper
over the grinding wheels.

Could we but see the Erynnes *appearing*
visibly in the air, and seen by others,
know that they were outside us,
not within...
But we must be both Furies
and eaten breast,
the bird that battens
on its own fouled heart —
Oh, eat the heart away
till all is clean!
It was in this river,
running below the train,
it was in this river, in the Metaurus,
Orestes washed his guilt away.
Not all the rivers of Arabia
could cleanse our sins.

At the Chthonic shrines,
under the old dispensation,
when they poured libations
at the altar's foot,
did an answer ever come
from the wet clay?
Did it ever find a voice to answer
the children of earth
when they prayed to the Earth Mother,
from the silence
at the flower's root?

V

Now we are wandering
in ox-hide Sicily,
island that was once dear to Demeter,
But in Demeter's place Maria stands
there in the plastered niche.

Shall we be whiter,
whiter than new-picked cotton,
washed in the holy water
of this silent church?
In Syracuse
the flags were flying at half mast
on all the little boats
in the harbour.
Genuflecting to the empty altar,
Is it Good Friday always now? we said.
Wondering we asked them,
but no one answered,
no voice called from the forest:
Great Pan is dead!

I have been Koré —
In this cold winter I remember
I have been Koré,
once completely loved.
In our time we have all been Koré,
each of us once, once only,
has been loved.
Selinus, Himera, Segesta...
Here are the temples
on the lonely coast
by the blue tideless sea.
Untrodden floors
encrusted with white daisies,
full of silence now
and murmur of bees.

Only the night and day visit them;
no one will come again to worship there.
The Greeks have sailed away,
their time is done.
The asphodels
are taller than the city.

Now the sea winds blow,
the sea sands cover
the fallen columns
and the faceless coin.

VII

At Agrigento,
by the Chthonic shrines,
we stood one day.
Did Orestes visit that dark place,
that maze of stone,
seeking an answer
from his father's ghost?
(Poor ghost grown dumb).
The earth at the altar's foot
is heavy with question;
there is no meaning
in the wind's whisper
in the asphodels,
or in the sound of the sea
rising and falling
on the desolate beach.
No answer comes
from the silence
at the flower's root.

VIII

Oh, must we always live
with the fixed past?
Is there no future
in which we can alter the sunken day?
The Furies follow us too,
but the healing waters ran dry

with the old faiths...
Where can we wash away
our guilt? How can we find again
the mistaken turning —
go back and follow the unnoticed path
that leads to another world,
in another May?

Can the heart return
down the long corridors
whose doors open on empty rooms?
There where the grey wind blows
against the cracked panes
of the crooked windows,
and the grey dust stirs,
and the mouldering
lifts up from the walls,
is there a trace still left
of all that is gone?
Will forgiveness fall like dew,
come to us weeping in the rain?
Could there be something there,
at the end of the empty corridor,
something that is not grief,
and is not fear?

For sometimes here, in this ancient country,
it seems to us that we might still receive
the message for which we have always been waiting,
the letter which has never come.
Perhaps those boats beyond the harbour
are bringing it to us,
sailing in with slack sails
from the far horizon.
Or perhaps it is lying among those ruins,
or hidden in those grasses.

Or do the shadows of the olives
form the unreadable writing
in the unknown tongue?

IX

But we are in Sicily no longer,
we have come back to Italy—
this is that Cape Palinuro,
where Palinurus was drowned.
And yet not his the bones
that choke the hollow cave
where the fishermen
draw their nets
and boats to dry,
lying in layers
among the shells and sands.
Are they the bones
of mariners of Augustus,
drowned there once,
so the guide books tell us;
or, as the sailors said,
the bones of the Antediluvians
swept there by the flood?
Vanity, to ask is vanity!
They are anonymous death;
all death is one;
all bones are equal
in the wash of the sea.

Palinurus, the castaway,
pray to Demeter,
who leads back the Spring,
Renewer of the Year,
Star of the Sea!

I am lost, as Persephone,
who have been Koré.
I am she Demeter is seeking
among the shadows;
and I am seeking Demeter,
in the grey ruins,
in the faint green
of the rising corn.
I have spoken to the earth,
but there is no answer.

Speak to the earth,
weary it with importunities
of the same question.

X

Like Orestes
we have journeyed a long way
and found no peace.
We have washed ourselves
in the rivers where he bathed—
they were only water—
and yet the same Furies follow us.
Always dark on the far horizon
flying toward us;
never quite reaching us,
yet always approaching.....
Like Orestes
we have returned on our tracks,
Some Oracle has muttered,
in the fallen stones,
in the drifting smoke,
that here in Calabria
the oxen may lie down.

XI

At Locri,
among the ancient olives,
stands Demeter's shrine;
the empty cave
where the dead Goddess dwells.
As we came to it
the bells were ringing,
all the bells on the hill
were ringing down:
Persephone has come,
Persephone has come!
Down ringing the bells,
from the church on the hill
ringing down:
Persephone has come!

And at the cross-roads
the procession met us,
the priest with the blue banners,
the children rejoicing round the Mother
in her tinsel crown.

I have been Koré—
in this cold winter I remember
I have been Koré,
once completely loved.
In our time we have all been Koré,
each of us once, once only,
has been loved.

XII

We have journeyed a long way,
and found no peace,

Winter has been too long
and Spring is late;
and still the Furies come
always pursuing;
still we have found
no one who can forgive.
It is still Winter here.....
Is the ice creeping
over the frost-bound world
has the heart's shadow
hidden the growing sun?
Ah, no,
the Spring will come;
Summer will break
in great tides on the land.
fill all the valleys,
even when we are gone.
Surely the steams will rise,
from the deep frozen sources.
from wells of pain;
young leaves will redden and green
the oaks and ashes.....
And suddenly birds will be singing,
the wet clouds gone;
the halcyon-fair seas calm;
dead earth will awake,
the fields grow living with grain.
And Spring will return,
with a wave of flowers advancing
on the Winter plain!

Ceres-Demeter,
Love that still seeks for Koré
in the unreturning Spring,

Hear us
Mother!

CHRISTOPHER PERRET

THE ASSUMPTION

The 15th of August was a Monday, and at six a.m. the shutters of the farmhouse were still closed. Méo was still in bed, his head propped up on several pillows. He wore a stocking-cap against the draughts, and the sheet was pulled stiffly up to his chin. He might have been dead had he not slowly opened his yellow eyes. The light from the East slanted in through the shutters. A gentle sun touched the crucifix above his head. Light fell softly on the two straw chairs, across the olivewood table, on the wooden pegs stuck into the whitewashed wall. Méo glanced around him, then up. A black spider crawled into the ceiling-beams, away from the morning light. A faint breeze blew the gauze curtains— a fly blew in. The cock crowed. Another cock answered from another farm. The pigs grunted lazily in the pigsty.

There had been a storm during the night. The black squall clouds had hung rolling over the mountains for well over four hours. Méo had awakened to hear the thunder crash, and to see the lightning unleash itself with blinding fury on the sleeping valley. There had been no taming such a storm. It had blown back & forth across the sky, back & forth from mountain peak to mountain peak— like a horde of Berber cavalry, turning back on its heels to strike & strike again. Méo reflected that the rain had been good for the

plants: « if only the wind and lightning didn't cause too much damage! » It would enliven the parched soil. It had been only the day before that Méo had walked through the corn and picked up a handful of the red earth. It had been like powder: dried and cooked into hard, sterile lumps. There would have to be rain...

Méo closed his eyes; but quickly opened them again. Downstairs he heard the shutter-doors squeak on their hinges. Catalina would be up: tip-toeing quietly from the kitchen to the poultry yard; from there to the vegetable garden— putting milk out for the kitten; heating the coffee. Méo turned on his side with a grunt. He looked up at the colored print on the wall: the Blessed Virgin in pale blue & white, her arms outstretched in blessing— and ascending, on a cloud, to Her place in Heaven. About Her, golden Angels sang Hosanna. The hand of God reached down to draw Her to His side. The colors had faded with the years; there was a long tear at the corner. Méo sadly remembered how old the world had become. He had stuck a sprig of Myrtle above the picture, throwing an intricate shadow on the Virgin face. The Myrtle was old, the leaves curled and yellowed. He must put a fresh one in its place. Then, raising himself on one elbow, he spoke secretly to the Virgin:

« Alas, You are getting old & frayed— yet to me You are still my Venus. You are still Beauty & Love & what, of life, goes without need of explanation. For me, You are the Most Blest of Virgins & Goddess of Happiness. And what more does a man need to pray to? In You I can put my spirit, my heart, & my senses. It suffices! A man who has come to understand needs no more. An old man can afford to cast off the jewels, the wreaths of flowers, the rich garments. An old man can be satisfied with a goddess who is no more than a woman— who needs no more than the simplest cloth to shield her body from the rude elements. »

He sighed and reached a foot down to the floor.

« So today I'll bring You a fresh crown— for I believe

it's Your anniversary. Some call it by another name. It makes no difference! »

Now he could smell the coffee steaming. He heard his daughter moving about downstairs preparing the breakfast. The cock crowed. He looked regretfully at the Virgin.

« Now I must go... but I'll be back later. I won't forget... »

He got out of bed and opened the shutters. The curtains blew in. The sun streamed in to light Assumption Day.

Méo carefully felt his way down the few steps to the kitchen. He went in, up behind his daughter and kissed her on the nape of the neck. She turned happily:

« Why do you do that? »

« Because it's Assumption Day— the Virgin's day— and because you are so pretty. »

« O Méo... »

« Because you are as lovely as the Virgin Herself. »

« O! you shouldn't talk like that! »

« I wouldn't be a Christian to deny it, » Méo said with a sly twinkle in his eye.

« You shouldn't say things like that, Méo. It's blasphemous, » his daughter replied with a blush. She turned back to her work, placing a tuft of hair behind her ear— then turned back to her father with a smile.

« You *are* coming to church today aren't you? »

« O yes... though I fear I'm beyond salvation, » Méo replied.

« Why do you keep talking like that? » she said sadly.

They sat down to their steaming bowls of coffee. The clock on the wall ticked slowly as Méo dipped his bread into the hot liquid.

« If mother saw you eating like that... »

« You certainly are getting to be a shrew, Catalina! »

And then they both laughed. The sun slanted to the kitchen window— three bees looked golden on the curtain.

« Well! » Méo said, pushing back his chair: « it's time for another crown for my Venus! »

He got up and walked out past the stable. Inside, Juen, the old plowhorse, snickered as he heard his master's footstep. Méo walked to a clump of small shrubs and broke off a twig. He walked back into the house and placed the fresh Myrtle above the Virgin's head; then he took a thumb-tack from a little lacquered box and stuck it where the tear was.

« There You are: all fresh & new! »

« Today will also be your day, » the Virgin said.

« Will You forgive me that I have let You get so worn? Your color fades, Your edges become ragged— & I feel the years pass & crumble. »

« We've been here a long time, Méo, » the Virgin replied. To Méo her voice seemed so soft, it almost seemed like the brush of Hummingbird wings. Then remembering— She smiled wanly: « I'm old, Méo! I'm old & tired. Why do people still make so much fuss over me? »

MÉO: Because in their way they love You.

MADONNA: Are they blind, Méo? Can't they see I am but a crone? Can't they see I have wept until in me there is nothing left but the vast emptiness of deserts?

MÉO: You are wiser than we, O Mother Merciful! You know that we see what we must. You know we must cling to some shadow, to some myth— however frail. Where should we be had not Your loveliness to hold before us as a Lamp?

MADONNA: Poor old Méo! Don't you see, either, how disfigured I have become?

MÉO: No, You are not disfigured— not to me. I have created my own image of You: You are Venus, the Goddess of Love. Thus, You have sustained me through these many years. Is it not enough?

MADONNA: It is a shame, Méo. It is a shame that life must

remain a dream. That it remains illusive & so chimerical, even after so many rude awakenings.

MÉO: Do You think we would understand more, or be better men, if we saw things as they are?

MADONNA: Have men ever been aught but blind?

MÉO: Don't You think, if it is so, that it must be necessary?

MADONNA: Look Méo! Look at all the horrors which have been committed in my name— in God's name— in the name of my Son— in the name of Virtue & Righteousness! Don't you think these have caused me pain? Do you think my Son— Who loved all men— taught them to be virtuous through Intolerance? to be Christian through Persecution & War? to follow His footsteps in the way of Avarice & Cant & Cruelty? No Méo! He has become a hideous farce— & I am metamorphosed. I have become a snake-haired fury: nothing better than a halfnaked witch turning men's minds to cruelty, sadism, & destruction! Men have made me the depositary of all their vilest passions! I have become a conquering goddess! A breastless amazon: conquering in the name of Satan— conquering in the name of Lust— conquering in the name of the common viper! Yes, conquering light with the pall of evil & darkness!

MÉO (*falling on his knees*): O Mother of God! is this a way to speak on this joyous day?

MADONNA: Perhaps you are right, Méo. You have become old & wise. You have ever lived a simple & good life. Perhaps you are right! Perhaps is it right & necessary for man to follow the moth. Perhaps is it inevitable that he must ultimately destroy himself. But am I to rejoice?

MÉO: Your heart weeps, my Lady...

MADONNA: My only Son died to save them. My one & only Son, Méo... & all in vain! Can you, old man, know what sorrow is in my heart? Look at me, Méo: look at my face. I am like any other woman. If I must bear the whole world's burden, it is my misfortune & fate. Nevertheless, I am but a woman— and sometimes, the

load seems too much. Sometimes I feel myself fainting from its weight. Sometimes I haven't even the strength to ask for mercy & respite. Can you wonder— you who have lived & aged the years— can you wonder that my face is worn, that my color fades, that I am old, that I die? Can you sincerely wonder that my petals fall as those of the ephemeral flower?

MÉO: I begin to understand, Sweet Lady.

MADONNA: I have lived too long. That is the curse, Méo! To live beyond one's purpose— to live beyond one's comprehension. I am but a relic: worn smooth by the lips of men. There is no rekindling the fire in a heart which has turned to ash.

MÉO: You are right My Lady. I too have grown old. I too am outliving my time & purpose. I can no longer turn the soil as I once did. No longer can my eyes pick the ripe fruit at a glance. My hands are no longer steady & firm on the plow. I begin to understand Your meaning: that a man, like a style of dress, is made but for the particular moment. I begin to perceive the world changing &, alas, I am too old to change with it. My daughter is perhaps yet young enough. Perhaps can she yet attune herself to the pace & the sound. I fear she must take my place...

MADONNA: Yes, Méo, you will have your rest. You have toiled long enough, & now you will have your sleep. But I am less fortunate. I must yet remain, for the choice is not mine. I am here for eternity: to plague men's minds with illusion— to weep at my helplessness to show them the right & kind way. Yet, if only your daughter can see through the mask which has been thrown upon my wasted face, I can help her! Fear not, old man, I shall care for her. I shall watch over your Catalina.

MÉO: In Your goodness & mercy, Kind Lady, my mind rests easy. I thank You for Your special favor. And now I must go. She awaits me— &, as ever, the living are impatient.

MADONNA: Go Méo! Go in peace— for today will be your day. May you profit from its mystery.

Méo bowed his head, got up, and went out. Once downstairs, he put on a tightfitting black suit and a black felt hat. He looked at himself in the old veined mirror, and ran his hand over his face: « Yes, I am old, » he reflected sadly; « my face is like the fruit of the Medlar tree. »

Then he went out to bridle Juen. He patted the horse on the flank, and the animal, accustomed to his hand, nibbled at his collar.

« We've been together a long time, Juen... You too have earned your sleep. »

The horse whinnied softly and Méo gently hitched him to the cart. Catalina ran from the house and Méo helped her up onto the seat— then he took his place stiffly by her side. The cart started off through the country. Out from the trees, the sun was blistering; but, in the shaded places, the ground was still damp from the storm. The road ran between rows of rich foliage: figs and apples hung glistening, laden among the dusty leaves. The cart raised a thin cloud of dust. The country buzzed. The air spiralled hazily; and the dust settled once more. Méo looked out at the fields.

« The storm was hard on the corn, » he said looking at the bent and broken stalks. « The wind was too much— and yet we had to have rain. What a shame, Catalina, that to what is purposeful & good, there must be added a grain of salt. But it seems to be the whole of life— life as the Lord willed it... »

In the church, the statue of the Immaculate Conception had been laid on a bed glistening with semi-precious stones. Her white hands were crossed on Her breast. Her eyes were closed as in sleep. A wreath of white roses had been placed round Her head, another at Her feet. Madonna-lilies had been laid by Her, lending a rich aroma to the packed church. The Virgin had died— had breathed Her final breath. She would

rise to Heaven on a lily-white cloud. She would sit on the left hand of God the Father; and Angels would praise Her and mortals adore Her. She would be the Mother of God— the Mother of Saints and of men. She would lend grace and purity, beauty and fragrance to the Kingdom of Heaven.

Méo let Catalina go first into the pew, then stood closest to the aisle. He bowed his head and held his hat during the whole of the mass. From beneath half-closed eyelids, he watched the candles glitter on the altar. At times they seemed like golden tear-drops before his eyes. He listened to the litany as from a great distance: it sounded strangely like the hum of flies. He watched the priest reach secretly behind the curtain veiling the tabernacle— the people walk forward with bowed heads and kneel before the altar rail— the priest bending to carefully place the Host on their tongues. He heard the women beat their chests: « Kyrie eleison... » look to Christ and beat their chests: « Kyrie eleison... » with lips parted, their throats parched— then look down, their eyes averted from God the Son bleeding high above the altar. Méo felt the light stream through the arched windows: the sun & Christ & the rainbow— and the kaleidoscopic light touch the sleeping Virgin. Finally, he heard the people rise— kneel, scrape & rise, cough. The priest moved into the vestry. Catalina nudged him with her elbow. They shuffled out on each other's heels— Méo touched his forehead with water— out through the massive wooden doors. Outside the air was stifling. The sun had risen high, and Méo felt his head reel from the change.

Once home, Méo unbridled Juen then put on a faded cotton suit. He sat on the edge of a chair and put on his worn sandals. He took his straw *sombrero* from a peg, and went back out into the blazing sun.

« I must go to Don Rodrigo's! » he called out to Catalina; then he walked the two kilometers to the landowner's plantation. Don Rodrigo stood beneath a tree awaiting him. He had on a light, faint-striped summer suit, and wore a Panama low over his eyes. In one hand he deftly held a long ivory

cigarette-holder. Méo thought he looked too much like a general, looking out, with self-confidence, onto the field of battle. Don Rodrigo smiled crisply, greeted Méo courteously, then stamped out his cigarette with exactitude.

The brown mule had been hitched to a large horizontal wheel above the well. It walked round & round with blindfolded eyes, its head dejectedly down, its tail swishing off the horse-flies— and the water came up in little yellow buckets to pour into the irrigation ditches. It flowed through the cornfield as Méo walked along with a hoe, clearing the stones away, the sticks and clods of dirt which might keep back the water. The water ran through the brown ditches, between the rows of yellow corn crackling on the breeze. The air cooled and the ground broke. The sun beat down— and the fire & water combined were what life is made of.

When the siren sounded from the textile factory, Don Rodrigo brushed himself off and went off to Donna Isabella for lunch. Méo was left alone in the fields. He sat down close to a Pomegranate and looked out over the uniform tops of the orange trees. The mule walked round & round and the buckets clicked on the wheel. Méo looked towards the sea. Faintly visible between the mountains was the pearl-colored sea-sky. Against the sky, on his left, the Umbrella Pines and Fir trees leaned precariously to the south— weighed down and twisted by the ever-recurrent North Wind. On Méo's right, the valley rose fertile into the hills and silver of the olive groves; onto the terraced almond trees; into the plums; past the low stone walls; through the parched ravines to the rock & jut of the windblown peaks.

Méo could remember it all: more than seventy years of the growing valley. The rising up— the spreading of wings. The intermittent destruction. The villas richly built on the old Moorish campgrounds— the churches razed by the ragged Republican troops. The drone of the aeroplanes: the little specks of green metal bringing fear through the afternoon skies. The unearthing of Greek vases and of Carthaginian terracottas. The chance discovery of a Roman house and its

fountains. The land being constantly tilled and enriched by his own people. The young trees planted; the seedlings tenderly cared for. The irrigation ditches dug & flowing, so that the whole of the valley might blossom forth, might fill & sweeten the air with a lush vegetation. The factory built— partly destroyed by shell-fire— then aggrandized so that the town might prosper. The merchants thriving; the hotels built and breaking the skyview; the roads tarred. The horse carts giving place to the automobiles. The earthquake; the avalanches; the forest fires and violent electric storms; the one freak hurricane; the savage, indiscriminate war: the whole built up, destroyed, and built up again. He had seen seventy-five years of the valley. It was a long time: long enough to catch a glimpse of the whole rise & fall of life.

Méo remembered with surprise that he had never been anywhere. That his whole life had been simple and devoted to the furthering of his own plot of land and of his own people. Once, when he was young, he had had a yearning to break away. How the vast sea had beckoned! The vague horizon had drawn him into the thrashing waves to his waist. He had felt the splash of salt on his lips and in his eyes. Then he had turned his back on the Temptress. He had walked back inland with relief— his trousers clinging wetly to his legs. Later he had been grateful. He had stayed to watch the valley grow from a seed to its full-bloom. He had had no need to follow the whirlwind to its core.

Of a sudden, the sky rumbled beyond the mountains. A cannon boomed in the gorges: a warning to the ships at sea. There would be another storm that night. Méo unhitched the mule from the wheel. He took its blindfold off and the animal shook its head vigorously, sensing its freedom. He took the burlap off its back and walked it to pasture. The mule galloped away and stood off watching him. Méo shut the pasture gate and the mule began to crop the grass. The earth in the cornfield soaked up the water from the ditches— soon nothing was left but a bed of brown mud. Beyond its zenith, the sun beat down. The day was still hot.

Méo broke off a stout willow. The heat made him dizzy, and his legs were old: he needed a stick to lean on. He walked slowly homewards, his hat down over his eyes. The land seemed white from the heat; glaring and indistinct as an arid desert. In the distance, two nuns were coming towards him: like Cypress trees: black & conical. A boy rode by whistling on a bicycle. His cotton trousers blew on the wind. Ahead of Méo, he leaped off his wheel, knelt one knee in the dust, and kissed a nun's rosary. The nuns moved on towards Méo— the boy leapt away, whistling again on late Assumption Day.

« Years & years of the valley, » thought Méo: « and there are things that never change. »

He tipped his hat to the nuns and they smiled.

« Years & years of the valley, and there are things that grow old and cannot regenerate themselves. »

Méo dozed the late afternoon, waving the flies off with a newspaper. He awoke in time to do the evening chores. In the kitchen, Catalina was ironing a dress. At sundown she would go to the ball on the town-square.

The sun was going down out of sight— and the remaining light was without fire. Méo sat on his haunches before the hen-house. A red pullet hadn't come home. Perhaps was it lost? Perhaps had it fallen prey to a hawk or a stoat? But the pullet failed to return. Méo closed the wire door and went in. In the kitchen, he sat on a stool, watching Catalina ready herself.

« One of the pullets is lost. »

« Maybe it will come in tomorrow... »

« I doubt it. They usually don't. »

Through the open window drifted in an apricot scent— a breeze edged with anise and the rose. Not far off, sheep had been pastured for the night. Through the pear trees came the sound of their bells and the shrill bleat of a frightened lamb.

« Is anyone coming to fetch you? »

« No. Perhaps I'll meet Clara and Jimenez on the way. »

« Is there going to be a hand? »

« O certainly! It's to be one of the biggest balls they've ever had. »

« Then I imagine you'll have a good time... »

« Why don't you come too, Méo? »

« Me! At my age! No thanks— my time of running to dances is over. I'll just listen from the garden. »

« But you won't hear anything. »

« I always do. »

He watched his daughter with fondness. « She isn't a girl anymore, » Méo reflected. « She must be thirty-five now. » And she still wasn't married. « Her face is still pretty & young though. »

He watched her take on her dress. She was plumpish but well made— and once she had put on her green dress, and had fixed her coral ear-rings & necklace, she looked quite comely. Catalina looked at herself closely in the small mirror and carefully put on a dark lipstick. She placed a red rose in her hair.

« You look very good, Catalina. »

« Thank you, Méo, » she said, looking at him happily.

« If I were still a young man, I'd have a difficult time keeping my eyes off you. »

« Tush! You didn't seem to take much notice of me when I was young and still pretty, » she answered modestly.

« There was your mother then... »

Catalina pulled her dress tight at the waist and went close to her father. She kissed him on the forehead. He put his hands on her hips and looked up into her eyes.

« You should get married soon, Catalina. »

« Maybe. »

« You know, I may be gone soon. »

« You Méo! You'll be here long after I've been laid next to mother. »

« It isn't right that you should be here all alone. »

« What is there to be afraid of? »

« You'll need someone to help you with the farm. »

Catalina went out and came back with her fan. She kissed Méo on the cheek.

« Don't worry, Méo. »

He watched her go out the door.

« And don't get caught in the storm! »

« I'll be back early. »

Méo watched his daughter walk up the road gently swaying her hips. He watched her as long as he could, and then it got too dark to see. He went to the garden and sat there rocking close to a Palm tree. The kitten curled itself close to his feet and began to purr. Then he heard the distant band strike up a *Fandango*. The music undulated through the trees, and the old man listened intently. He had danced often with his wife. They had met at a dance— and then had danced together forty years. He heard the band begin a *Jota*. It was a difficult dance. It had been his favorite.

Soon the nightwind came up and Méo shivered. He walked around the house and looked at the clouds forming above the mountains. There would be a storm. He plucked a white rose from its bush— already the dew was forming. He looked at the faint glow of the town lights on the sky. Then he closed the shutters and went in.

When Catalina came home, there was already a fine drizzle of rain. Paco and Jimenez accompanied her— one of them holding an umbrella to shield her head. Both men were slightly drunk. Catalina held her finger to her lips.

« Ssshhhh! Méo is asleep. »

A single light burned in the kitchen. The three of them tip-toed in quietly. Catalina made the two men sit down at the kitchen table. She brought out two glasses and a half-filled bottle of *Xerez*.

« You'll both have a drink before you go? »

While the men poured out their drink, she walked up to Méo's room. His door was closed, so she opened it noise-

lessly. Her father was kneeling on the floor, his elbows propped up on a chair and his head in his hands.

« What are you doing Méo? »

There was no answer and Catalina turned on the light. The old man had taken down the Madonna. It was there on the chair, before him. On each side, he had placed a candle— both now extinguished. Above the picture was a sprig of Myrtle. On the floor lay a white rose. Catalina leaned down and kissed him on the cheek— then tears welled up in her eyes. She walked quietly back to the kitchen.

« Méo is dead. »

They put down their glasses and looked at her peculiarly. Paco cleared his throat. Jimenez stood up.

« Can you both wait here while I call the priest? »

« I'll go, » said Paco: « Don Pedro lives on the other side of town. »

« No. I prefer to go. »

They nodded as she threw a wrap on her shoulders— then she went out.

« What do we do Paco? »

« Maybe we'd better go up. »

Paco drained his glass, and they walked upstairs. They filed into the room and looked at the old man.

PACO: He's kneeling!

JIMENEZ: What a strange old man.

PACO (*picking up the rose*): I wonder why this rose?

JIMENEZ: Look! he has something in front of him— as if he were praying.

PACO: He died in Sin.

JIMENEZ: It looks like a picture.

PACO: He died without confessing.

JIMENEZ: I can't see what it is.

PACO: Why didn't he call a priest?

JIMENEZ: What can it be?

PACO: His face is so distorted.

JIMENEZ (*picking up the Madonna*): Why! there's nothing here. Just faded clouds.

PACO (*stooping to look closely at Méo*): His face is so ugly.
JIMENEZ: It's called the Assumption!
PACO: And you say there's no Blessed Virgin?
JIMENEZ: No. There's nothing but what seems to be clouds.
PACO: It must be some blasphemous joke of the old man's!
JIMENEZ: I thought of marrying his daughter.
PACO: Are you out of your mind!
JIMENEZ: How was I to know?
PACO: Look at his face! It is black like a withered fruit. He is accurst!
JIMENEZ: Who knows what she might be?
PACO: He is black as Beelzebub himself!
JIMENEZ: Let's go Paco! Is there any reason to wait?
PACO: Yes! let's go before we too are curst!
JIMENEZ: He crowned the picture with Myrtle.
PACO: As if it were a Pagan goddess.
JIMENEZ: Paco! suppose Don Pedro finds us here!
PACO: He would think we had a hand in this.
JIMENEZ (*backing towards the door*): Quick Paco! Quick! before it is too late!

Sóller, Mallorca

JOSÉ GARCIA VILLA

DEATH AND DYLAN THOMAS

Gold, gong, of,
Genius: continual, fire: leger, nobler,
Of, lights. Genesis', fettled, dazer:
Gold-coilèd, Adam: dare-Adam, voice.
Sleep, Dylan.
Deity, began, you, giant —
In, Plato's, curve, single:
And, now, Death, greatlaw, great,
King-lighter, his, right, hand,
Shines, your, name, the, whole, heaven, long.

Sleep, Dylan.
Sleep, gentle, genius. *Very, Death, saith:*
This, death, I, annul...
Eternity, bloodtells, him: O,
From, his, lived-

In, rose: into, life's, lifeline,
Falcon-and-famous-verb, thrusts, him!
And, exceller, beautiful,
Commandant, incendiar, oh, nightgold,
Forerunning, verb, myth-hard, he, stands.

EMMANUEL TORRES

FEAR OF GATES

I have a fear of gates closing. To hear
The squeak that rusty hinges give, the slam
As the iron bolt descends without argument
To bar entry. Always there is someone in and
Someone out. The boy I was stood just
Outside the leaden bars hard as the cold
Rain that leaked and leaked through the thick
Leaves, blackening the boles of acacias
That sentineled the passage, seeping through
The shivering skin of fear, and slipping under
A round stone staring up at me like a wet eye.
The gates were metal, dripping indifference.

I am not sure now if I have outgrown
My early paranoia concerning gates.
I still distrust gates shut. Or open.
Something ticks behind my head that freezes

My step, although beyond the whitewashed fence
A lane beckons, ah! a causal garden
That presses coolly green thumbs at my eyes.
I wait in vain for the catch, but O there is none,
Wink the sunflower faces and the susurrating
Fountain where lie mirage-like naked nymphs.
The landlord's absent here. The mango on the mango tree
Is ripening fast (O eatage) beyond open gates.

I blame my spinster aunts, that I sometimes
Sweat in apprehension at night when a storm
Rages and a gate bangs, bangs in the wind.
There was something humid about the tales
They told me with my catechism. How the maid Flora
Was pawed by a badman in a padre's frock
Behind a gate. Or how gates are terrible
After curfew in the Chinese cemetery, for bats
Creak out of creaking hinges in legions, legions,
Collecting the heart of midnight in their wings
As over the gray stones they flicker, flicker
Like my fears of night storms banging iron gates.

And always people won't leave the subject alone,
When discussion turns the corner of fear into
The Serious. Keep your virgin daughter indoors
And shut the gates. Against conquering armies, the gates.
And there are other gates too much to bear
(The reason I skip Apocalypse). But I must
Bear it: the Jesuit's pulpit warning is itself
The thing I fear most standing lean and final as
The judgment plaque on Dante's gate of doom.
Like a shiver the Dies Irae *comes and goes,*
And one forgets in the light and labor of day.
Till the dark swoops down, a shroud. Brother, the gates!

GIRL TAKING A SIESTA

The plump girl dozing
in her siesta appeals to you.
So undemanding a dish
of melons that ripen in
the light and cools
your book-worn eyes. From
the window sunshine and
air naked with the smiles
of boys tumble between
her breasts. But O
she lies beyond your reach
though you may have
her in the room you keep
your bed in, or in the high
verandah. Almost a mirage
of summer, you think aloud.
But the sun defines her
as real as those solid thighs
that rock the rocking chair
she dozes in. But ah,
this is how precisely you
can *hold her, not in your room*
or in the high verandah
or even your rude arms demanding,
but in that rich orchard
where you can fable her
flesh, where the light
throbs always and does not,
as here, slip in and out.
Let her wake and let her
go beyond your sight and then
you may grin as you wish,
for her being so sure and gay

she is above all boys,
and not quite under,
and in the castle of,
your skin.

ROLANDO S. TINIO

SPRIG OF JASMINES

Delicate with missing scent, their color faint,
These petals, all but rent, shall yet remain
Closed and pressed as in those limping years
That added years upon my age. I have no fears,
Nor had

that faded afternoon when Mother left
Them on my little hand, unstable as it stretched
Towards the window of the buggy where she rode,
Crowded by the flaring of the man's loose coat.
She looked once at my eyes

then gave away,
Her thinning fingers missing me, the little spray
Of jasmine buds, picked, I knew, from flower-fields
She drove to, afternoons, in our old familiar rig.
« I found him there, » she said. « I took him for a lift.
I bobbed my head to peer beyond her darkened shoulder
But the face, gone to somewhere, wasn't there.

« He asked me drive him to the end of our narrow street. »
Not too far.

The gentle sprig of jasmines in my hand,
I moved, but rig wheel rattling, turned. I scanned
The stirring scene, the shaking buggy coming after.
In a book I locked them, locked them after.

GENTLE MY SONG

Gentle my song and slip us like the night.
Early morning lambent on the floor sprawls white

As the shapeless moon of temporary summers
In the tropic city. Our narrow cave is dumber

Than the egg-shell closing. Love lies speechless
On her salt-bed, head wounded by the nearness

Of the rooster's antedated crow. So gentle...
Our sculpturing of beauty in the ancient shell

Is a daring thing. Fingers like pins move
In a labor of telepathic love. The witch's dove

Caught in her hand is cushioned against the breast
With a tarnished pin. The reeling echoes of the past

Dovetail with the egg-shell echo of the cove.
Down in the probed deep, we are minute from above.

The bottom is as comfortable as the dark
And, liquescent, we seek our own levelled mark.

Go like a bird on paper wings, like the winds
On our sunken foreheads, thin like the mind's

Partitioning. Temples are exhumed from the flat
Earth silent and healed. The mayas who have sat

On twisted twigs are bruised in the new
Destruction. Confident as men loving, they knew

Nothing of the history of twigs and wounds,
The recklessness held in stone and bound.

Silence moons on the broken stones. The last
Stir on the pointed crag is a poisoned bat's.

RICAREDO DEMETILLO

COLD, COLD AND CLOTTED WITH THE SEDIMENT

Be merciful who, in a snagging time,
Catch at my blundering ankles to spraddle me
On crushing doubt and lonely damps of lies,
To bay me with my hackled conscience. Be
Thou merciful who gale my mottled rhyme
Which flashes fins in murky wriggles, changes
Color and flounders like our flat fluke time.
Gnaw not my gutted toenails where a raindrop plunges
Cold, cold and clotted with the sediment
Mortality dams up along each vein and bone,
Until my graveward furies stagger, spent,
Seeding no whimper on indifferent stone.

The feat of conscience on the sagging nails
Where wails the cry that seeks despair's reprieve
Told by my thumb in cahoots with my slump,
Over the slimy fester of a guilt-shelled snail,
Wreaks vengeance on my doggy hang-tail faith.
Ask what the wick that sputters at my lamp,
But blow not, least the ardor of Thy breath
Snuff out the flame and my mongol head be blurred
Out of the landscape where the gross waifs grieve.
Oh, from the owl-like hoot that mocks the tick
Of Big Ben in its chromium case, retrieve
The spark that sputters on my near-charred stick.

THIS WEEDY GROUND, THIS NIGGARD SOIL

There is no lamp that leads me from the dark
Past doorsills to a room. Only the bark
Of mongrels and the growling darkness start
The hackles on my neck, where a black wart
Now registers the chill. I knock at doors
But they are locked. Windows are grilled by fear
Against the brigands of a desperate year,
Who boldly prowl and filch the doubly poor.

It is the month of mocking cuckoos, and the rain
Falls on the whoring blinds from which a slain
Moth dangles, stirred by lightning that eeriely bares
A divan mauled up by a naked pair,
Starting at creak of door or draught of air.
Drenched by cold shame, I remember that story
Of sodden death: of Agamemnon's body
And Clytemnestra's dark, incestuous hair.

I claim this weedy ground, the niggard soil
Of sense in which few sturdy poems coil.
I wait beyond this night the farther dawn
That I may coax fruit from the stubborn stone
And hew the ruins to another park.
Even the darkness shapes my shadow, and
I feel a solid footing where I stand,
Tall in the rubbled warping of the dark.

REBELLIOUS SONNET

The town oppressed me for the pallid priest
Droned to his flock a decalog of stone
Which taught decorum to their Sunday-best
And laced the ladies in their corselets of bone.
I fled the proper streets and chose a path
Across the frank loose meadow to the lake.
The silted ripples lapped away my wreath.
I was a bronzed god bared against the brake.

Then as I dangled luxurious on a stone,
The water nibbling at my feet, I gave
Shouts that amazed the birds, one a ruby-red.
Boldly I hurled defiance at the town
Huddled behind me like an open grave
Of dull concrete that clasped the mannered dead.

DOMINADOR I. ILIO

PERCIVAL ON AN ISLAND IN TIMES SQUARE ON NEW YEAR'S EVE

My quest will not end here I know. Here where
A gay Sargasso has started a flutter and gains
Celerity with each stroke of the wilting hour.
Here now the crowd jostles and shouts as in
A tournament at Camelot. And I,
On this neon-lit, sequestered island, am but
A desolate spectator. Heavens, I
Am steeply lónely for the splendid games
At Camelot.
O for the bamboo cannons,

The fireworks in the plaza, and a hundred
Tin cans clanging on the cobbled streets.
These ticker tape confetti, these leering lights,
And these sour shouts from the roiled depths assail
My pure heart.
That neon cup is not the grail.

ICARUS IN CATECHISM CLASS

Or make us angels all, with dirty feet,
Without wings, chanting the beatitudes
Without exultation nor thought, counting
The silver halos on the heads of saints,
And ignoring the pastels on the stunning
Stained glass windows.
This morning Daedalus

My father scraping the wax of last night's taper
Spoke of escape from this dark labyrinth,
This walled-in wilderness where the blackbirds twitter
Homilies from the pulpit.
O I wait

The noon. Soon the minutes will glibly run
Into the decades full of women and sinners —
O hour of my death, O let the noon bell ring,
I want to go home I want to put on my wings.

LEÓN FELIPE

EL CIERVO[1]

Prefacio y dedicatoria

El primer poema de este libro, *La Ventana*, es la variante de otro publicado con el mismo título hace seis años. Aquí va ahora como epígrafe, como un amplio epígrafe, como prólogo y definición. Arranca de ese versículo terrible de *El Eclesiastés*, tan terrible como la ciega y determinante fatalidad de los helenos, contra la cual *¿nada le es posible hacer al Hombre?* ¿Cómo romper esos círculos de hierro? Nacemos entre dos maldiciones: la de los dioses griegos que nos uncen a una negra y cerrada herencia inexorable, donde el crimen camina eternamente con la sangre... y la de Jehová, que nos cierra la puerta de los sueños que buscan cambiar el oscuro, recurrente y redondo paisaje del pecado. Porque

> Aquello que ha sido es lo que será
> y lo que se ha hecho, lo que se volverá a hacer.

Este versículo es aquí ahora el generador de la Canción, de la negra y rebelde canción que es este libro. Él estructura, unifica y justifica el tono herético de esta gavilla de « apólogos ». A veces aparece como el zumbido pegajoso de una

[1] Libro inédito del que se recogen aquí el Prefacio, la dedicatoria y algunos poemas que siguen, congruentes, la línea vertebral de la Canción.

moscarda negra, como un ritornelo condenatorio que nos persigue pertinaz.

El Hombre quisiera romper de alguna forma *los eslabones de esa cadena* que nos amarra sin misericordia a una reiterativa condenación: « Lo que ha sido es lo que será... » Y yo, para esta empresa no tengo otro martillo que la protesta poética:

No, no y no,

la palabra iracunda y el verso irreverente y desesperado:

No, no y no,

la negación instintiva de mi sangre contra ese versículo inmisericorde que no lo ha escrito Dios:

No, no y no.

Pero ¿quién soy yo? ¿Nadie? ¿Un forzado más que para dar testimonio de que ha estado aquí empujando, moviendo, haciendo girar la noria mecánica, fatal, isócrona y monótona del Mundo, ha escrito este libro?... Tal vez nada más.

Pero antes de marcharme, y como protesta, le dedico mi Canción al Arcipreste, al Gran Predicador, hijo de David, que reinó en Jerusalem...

Al Moscardón Negro de la Biblia

LA VENTANA

Diálogo entre el Hombre y el viejo Guardián de la Heredad

> Aquello que ha sido es lo que será ... y lo que se ha hecho, lo que se volverá a hacer.
>
> *Eclesiastés* I:9

G. *Ya estás aquí.*

H. *Me trajeron cuando estaba dormido. Yo no pedí nada. Yo no dije a nadie que me trajera.*

G. *Pero ya estás aquí.*

H. *¿Y qué tengo que hacer?*

C. *Puedes asomarte a la ventana... Puedes mirar el mar... el río... el puente... y el camino que sube a la montaña. Sobre la montaña verás el sol y las estrellas... Y si tienes buena vista, tal vez columbres a Dios sentado en el Triángulo Metafísico.*

H. *Probaré.*

C. *Allá en el valle sopla el Viento, el abanico del Viento moviendo los árboles y llevando y trayendo sin cesar las hojas y los pájaros... Aquí, más cerca, están el lobo y el cordero, el gavilán y la paloma... el ciervo herido... y el hombre con su lanza y su escopeta.*

H. *¿El Hombre?... ¿Yo?... ¿Ese soy yo?*

C. *Ese eres tú.*

H. *¿Y aquello? ¿Qué es aquello?*

C *El Amor.*

H. *¿El Amor?*

C. *El celador encargado de que siempre haya aquí uno... asomado a la ventana, mirando este paisaje pintado por Dios.*

H. *¿Dónde está Dios?*

C. *Ya te he dicho que Dios está allá arriba... lejos, al otro lado del camino... más allá de la montaña, meciéndose en las nubes... y mirándote asomado a la ventana... mirándote siempre.*

H. *¿Y para qué me mira?*

C. *Para que no te caigas.*

H. *¿Y si me caigo?*

C. *Mandará otro el Amor, para que siga mirando.*

H. *¿Y si se cae también?*

C. *Mandará otro.*

H. *¿Y luego?*

C. *Otro.*

H. *¡Infatigable celador!*

C. *Siempre tiene que haber aquí uno que mire al través de la ventana este hermoso paisaje pintado por Dios.*

H. *¿Y cómo estoy yo allí en el cuadro... y aquí también asomado a la ventana?*

C. *La Ventana es un sueño.*

H. *¿Un sueño?*

C. *El mirador del sueño... y el que mira por ella es el poeta.*

H. *¿Soy yo el poeta?*

C. *El poeta es el Hombre que mira. Y a ti te toca ahora mirar.*

H. *¿Mirar nada más?*

C. *Luego puedes, si quieres, cantar un himno dando gracias a Dios, al Señor de la Heredad que te ha elegido para venir aquí y mirar sin cesar por la ventana...*

H. *Sí... este hermoso paisaje* invariable *de girándula, donde hay siempre un ciervo herido y un hombre con su lanza o su escopeta... ¿no es así?*

C. *Así es, en efecto.*

H. *¿Y eso es todo?*

C. *Sí, todo... y* para siempre.

H. *¿Para siempre?*

C. *Para siempre... porque « lo que ha sido es lo que será... y lo que se ha hecho, lo que se volverá a hacer ».*

H. *¿Lo ha dicho así el Señor de la Heredad?*

C. *Lo ha dicho su Mayordomo, el Arcipreste.*

H. *¿Quién es el Arcipreste?*

C. *El Gran Predicador, el hijo de David. Alguien le ha llamado el moscardón negro de la Biblia... Fue rey de Israel, allá en Jerusalem.*

H. *Pues que toquen el órgano en su registro más grave porque voy a cantar:*

CANCIÓN

Gracias, Señor de la Heredad.
Gracias porque me dejas ver este paisaje de girándula
donde va y viene el Viento,
baja hacia el sur,

luego gira hacia el norte
llevándose y trayendo, sin cesar, las hojas y las aves.

« Girando y girando va el Viento
y torna continuamente a sus circuitos...
Los ríos van al mar,
vuelven luego a salir
y el mar nunca se llena.
El sol se levanta
y el sol se pone.
Una generación va
y otra generación viene... »
Y ahí... el ciervo siempre,
el ciervo herido siempre...
y el hombre con su lanza o su escopeta.
¡Gracias, Señor de la Heredad!

* * *

Sigue la Canción. Ahora hablan el Poeta y el Arcipreste.

EL CIERVO

— Todas las jaurías del rey
amaestradas por el cuerno
del mayoral, van a salir ahora otra vez...
Otra vez, Señor Arcipreste... otra vez a perseguir al ciervo...
— El ciervo es una bestia...
— ¡Cuidado!... ¿Una bestia
o una graciosa arquitectura donde está prisionero
el príncipe legítimo del mundo?
Vivimos desde hace mucho tiempo...
— desde el Principio, Señor Arcipreste —
en la historia sangrienta donde el rey es un bastardo criminal
que ha arrebatado al ciervo
el valle, el mar, el lago, el río...
el mundo maravilloso de los sueños.

El rey del mundo iba a ser este ciervo perseguido
que esconde en el sagrario divino de su cuerpo
el ángel del amor...
¿Nunca le ha mirado un ciervo, Señor Arcipreste?
¿No ha visto nunca usted sus ojos inocentes,
cargados con todas las promesas de los cuentos?
¿Qué niño, qué mujer, qué amor humano tuvo jamás esa mirada?
Sin embargo, la Historia ha sido siempre y va a seguir eternamente siendo
la jauría de un rey bastardo y criminal
persiguiendo sin descanso al ciervo...
Porque « aquello que ha sido es lo que será », y siglo tras siglo
siempre, siempre, siempre... bajo la girándula del Tiempo —
Señor Arcipreste, usted lo ha dicho... ¡Oh, destino del Hombre! —
volveremos a hacer lo que hemos hecho.

LA VUELTA

¿Y no sucederá, Señor Arcipreste,
que todo ha sido hecho
según la ley inexorable de la noria y de la rueda del molino?
Una vuelta, dos vueltas, tres vueltas: el agua, el pan, el sueño.
La vuelta es la medida.
Y moviéndolo todo — la sed, el hambre y el relevo —
unas veces la mula
y otras veces el Viento:
una vuelta, dos vueltas, tres vueltas...
Los círculos sin tregua, los recurrentes ceros.
La vuelta es la medida — la vuelta de la noria y de la rueda del molino...
la unidad de medida del Tiempo.

EL RELOJ

He aquí otra manera de medir:
Y gira y gira el llanto sin cesar...
como el rosario, como la noria, como el Mundo...
como la espiral del mecanismo perfecto y perpetuo de un reloj.
El año... el siglo... el Tiempo... Y el llanto contándole los pasos.
Contamos el Tiempo con las cuentas amargas de las lágrimas,
tic-tac, tic-tac, tic-tac... El pequeño reloj.
Y también contamos el Tiempo con el mar...
con el mar movido eternamente por el Viento.
El mar también es un reloj. ¿Verdad, Señor Arcipreste, que
el mar también es un reloj? El gran reloj.
Una ola, dos olas, tres olas...
Pasan los años y los siglos... y las olas no cesan.
Las olas van y vienen y se rompen...
Hay más olas que estrellas y que granos de arena...
Y contamos el Tiempo con las olas amargas coronadas de
espuma... tic-tac, tic-tac, tic-tac...
El gran reloj, Señor Arcipreste... el gran reloj de Sal.

JUEGO

— Ya has llorado bastante... Vamos a dormir.
Ya has dormido bastante... Vamos a llorar.
— Y así... del llanto al sueño,
acunado, movido eternamente, de abajo hacia arriba,
en un angustioso balanceo...
Y de arriba hacia abajo en el columpio
de la ascensión y del vértigo...
Y la ruleta, Señor Arcipreste, sin cesar... ¿Quién está allá
arriba?
— El Sol...
con sus estrellas consejeras, moviendo los dados del Destino,
en su gran cubilete de fuego...

jugándose tu vida...
a ver si es llanto o sueño.
— ¿Y allá abajo? ¿Quién está allá abajo?
— El Mar...
apostando, enfurecido, « al salitre y al soplo » con el Viento.
— « ¿Al salitre y al soplo? »
— A ver si tu llanto es rojo o negro...
amargo, amargo, amargo
o hueco, hueco, hueco.
— Y así eternamente siempre, Señor Arcipreste,
clavado, como un escarabajo en el Tiempo.
¡Que se callen ya todos y me dejen dormir!
Los que apuestan ahí abajo en el sótano
y los que juegan allá arriba a los dados, en el piso tercero.
Pero los jugadores no se callan...
los jugadores están siempre despiertos.
Y yo, desesperado,
acabo por tomar parte en el juego...
y ahora digo, gritando enfurecido: ¡Envido!
Todas mis lágrimas, amargas o vacías... todas
por un pedazo largo, largo, largo... profundo e interminable de sueño.

EPITAFIO

Aprende a escribir para redactar bien tu epitafio.
No escribas otra vez en los mármoles fríos
de los panteones insolentes
grotescas elegías funerarias.
Ni un nombre ni una fecha.
« Aquí yace... » ¡¡Basta!! Señor Arcipreste. Yo sé muy bien quién yace aquí.
(Se ha caído la lámpara...
y hubo estrellas que ya no se pueden registrar).
¡Aquí yace la Luz! *(como el aceite frío y derramado).*
Y... ¿en qué piedra, en qué cruz, en qué Historia

váis a escribir ahora este epitafio, Señor Arcipreste?
¡Oh, pobre Viento enamorado de la Arcilla!
Ahí solo, solitario otra vez,
sin albergue y sin cueva, mordiéndose la cola,
aullando y dando vueltas y vueltas, eternamente ciego,
en la noria vacía de la Nada.

HOMBRE...

No esperes más a nadie...
Nadie te aguarda ni te busca...
Fuiste... el aborto de un sueño...
la semilla podrida de un sueño, que nunca germinó.

EL CÁNTARO

...Porque todo había sido construido como a prueba y de un modo provisional — dijo el Viento disculpándose cuando se desplomó la última torre. — Y ya habían predicho los profetas y los augures innominados y sin cédula en el registro oficial y caprichoso de la Historia « que la vieja casa del Hombre no podía durar mucho tiempo ».

De *El libro de los augures y adivinos.*

No había otra salida que la muerte...
la destrucción... el sueño... el Gran Sueño
otra vez... el divorcio definitivo
de la Arcilla y el Viento.
El cántaro, aquel cántaro, el orgulloso cántaro
no estaba bien hecho.
Tenía un orificio sin control por donde se escapaban
el amor y el humo de los sueños...
y una grotesca panza excremental. Ya se quebró el cántaro...

para eso vino el átomo del rayo, lanzado por el átomo del trueno.
Ahora... Señor Arcipreste,
habrá que darle otra oportunidad al Alfarero.
Hay que empezar otra vez desde el Génesis como si nada hubiese sido antes.
¡Cuántas veces al orgulloso cántaro lo habrán hecho... deshecho... rehecho...!
Y cuántas veces todavía
tendrán que hacerlo... deshacerlo... y rehacerlo de nuevo.
Paciencia y esperanza... ¡¡Gong!!
Otra vez al Prólogo... otra vez al Comienzo...
Otra vez a la pella de arcilla dócil
amasándola Dios entre los dedos...
y otra vez al Viento... al soplo en las narices...
al milagroso vaho del aliento:
¡¡Ooohhh!!... ¡¡Ooohhh!!
A ver si ahora, Señor Arcipreste, con la experiencia de estos siglos,
tiene más suerte el Alfarero.

LA PALABRA

Pero ¿qué están hablando esos poetas ahí de la palabra?
Siempre en discusiones de modisto:
que si desceñida o apretada...
que si la túnica o que si la casaca...
¡Basta ya! La palabra es un ladrillo. ¿Me oísteis?... ¿Me ha oído usted, Señor Arcipreste?
Un ladrillo. El ladrillo para levantar la Torre... y la Torre tiene que ser alta... alta... alta...
hasta que no pueda ser más alta.
Hasta que llegue a la última cornisa
de la última ventana

del último sol
y no pueda ser más alta.
Hasta que ya entonces no quede más que un ladrillo solo,
el último ladrillo... la última palabra,
para tirárselo a Dios
con la fuerza de la blasfemia o la plegaria...
y romperle la frente... A ver si dentro de su cráneo
está la Luz... o está la Nada.

LA MÁSCARA

Viven el toro y la paloma
y aquellos animales genuinos y desnudos
que ya se han hecho símbolos.
Pero el hombre... es una máscara fantasma
que jamás ha vivido.
Sobre su invisible anatomía, ha colgado sin gracia
uniformes, mantos, hábitos, caireles y fanfarrias de circo,
y ha caminado por la Historia en carnaval perpetuo.
dando gritos de eunuco, chillones y fingidos,
esos gritos guturales de máscara perdida y solitaria:
¿me conoces?... ¿me conoces?...
Y ni Dios ni el Diablo le conocen.
Ni él se conoce a sí mismo.

¡Oh, pobre fantasma!
grotescamente siempre de carnaval vestido,
preguntando por todas las esquinas del mundo, a todos los
que pasan,
con el falsete agudo, irritante y plebeyo de su grito:
¿me conoces?... ¿me conoces?...
¿quién soy yo?
Y así eternamente siempre,
año tras año,
antruejo tras antruejo,

siglo tras siglo.
¿No cree usted, Señor Arcipreste,
que hay motivos de sobra para gritar y blasfemar?
— Motivos... motivos...
— Claro que el que no sepa usted quién es esa máscara fantasma no es, por sí sólo, un gran motivo.
Pero... ¿el que no lo sepa nadie?
¿O cree usted que lo sabe el Arzobispo?

PEDIGREE

— No me gusta el hombre ... ni la mujer tampoco...
Ni esta grotesca y sanguinaria casa donde vivo.
— Satánico orgullo y ambición.
— ¡Oh, no! Podrían encerrarme en
y diminuto de un cascarón de nuez y me creería
rey del espacio infinito ... si no fuera por estos
oscuros sueños monstruosos.

De un Hamlet *parafrástico, herético y condenado.*

¿Y por qué no hemos de ser la obra *de un dios monstruoso e inmisericorde, Señor Arcipreste,*
si nosotros estamos hechos de una substancia monstruosa e inmisericorde también?
¿Por qué ha de ser piadoso nuestro Dios?
¿Quién tiene piedad entre los hombres?
Además... ¿no es la vida una cadena de mandíbulas abiertas y devoradoras?
Y si la lombriz se traga la simiente,
la gallina a la lombriz
y el hombre a la gallina
¿por qué Dios no se ha de tragar también al hombre?
¡Gran manjar es el hombre!
¿No ha pensado usted nunca, Señor Arcipreste,
que bien podemos ser el alimento de un dios glotón y monstruoso?

y que estamos aquí *como en un túnel descomunal y oscuro,*
como en un gran esófago,
descendiendo...
descendiendo...
descendiendo lentamente,
pasando por los sórdidos, torcidos y laberínticos intestinos de la Historia?
Alguien nos ha tragado, borracho, en un festín
¿y nos seguirá tragando eternamente? « Aquello que ha sido... »
Y a veces uno sueña...
a veces uno sueña, Señor Arcipreste,
que nos defeca un dios glotón y monstruoso.
Siempre le andamos buscando orígenes y definiciones
a este orgulloso « Capitán de la Historia »:
El sueño de un dios,
la cópula amorosa de un dios,
el soplo de un dios...
Pero he aquí el último hallazgo existencialista y filosófico:
El excremento de un dios.
De cualquier manera, Señor Arcipreste,
divino es nuestro origen.
Y podemos seguir caminando,
descendiendo
descendiendo
por los sórdidos intestinos de la Historia
una vez
mil veces
cien mil veces... (« Lo que ha sido... »)
pero orgullosos siempre, orgullosos siempre, Señor Arcipreste,
de nuestro divino pedigree.

MARÍA ZAMBRANO

DIOTIMA

(*Fragmentos*)

¿Quién deshojará la rosa sobre mí, quién me llorará, y lo que me parece que más cuenta, quién alzará la mano despidiéndome y señalando a mi alma el camino a seguir, deshaciendo ese nudo que une aún a las almas de los recién muertos con el aire de la vida?, como hice tántas veces; primero con los míos, después, cuando me venían a buscar, porque en mi mano había una eficacia, una virtud. Entonces comencé a sentir, a saber que el amor ha de hacerse ley; que las leyes verdaderas son gestos de amor, momentos del amor. Y ahora, extranjera, a solas con mi Dios que se me ha vuelto desconocido, nadie veo a mi alrededor que me asegure ser ayudada en el momento de arrancarme de esta tierra, de la que más que hija he sido, por lo visto, huésped; un huésped que se ha detenido demasiado. No me he dado cuenta de que nadie ya me retenía, de que se habían acabado desde hacía tiempo las sonrisas del anfitrión, de que el anfitrión mismo había desaparecido; me había quedado sola y ni siquiera acudía ya a la mesa, falta de alguien con quien compartir mi comida.

Creí que necesitaban oirme, que les fuera trasvasando ese mi saber que, como agua, se escapa imperceptible, desborda de toda mi persona. Recuerdo cuando me lo decían: « No es una mujer, sino una fuente », y yo...

Pero ahora recuerdo — la memoria se me va convirtiendo

en ley — que yo misma me fuí volviendo cada vez más hacia la fuente original de donde mi saber llegaba gota a gota. Quizá durante tiempos y tiempos estuve seca, y alguien colocó piadosamente una piedra blanca de esas que yo amaba desde siempre, para que la herida en la tierra que es todo manantial que ya no mana, no fuera visible. Y aquel día fuí muerta y sepultada, mientras yo, sin apercibirme, atendía inmóvil el rumor lejano de la fuente invisible. Recogida sobre mí misma, todo mi ser se hizo un caracol marino; un oído... tan sólo oía y quizá creía estar hablando, cuando las palabras sonaban solamente para mí, ni fuera ni dentro; cuando no son ya dichas, ni escuchadas, como yo había soñado deberían ser las palabras de la verdad.

Me fuí convirtiendo en oído y al volver, nadie me escucha; me adentré en el silencio y soy su prisionera; y aunque hubiera aprendido a escribir, no podría hacerlo. Creí que el escribir es cosa de unos pocos hombres; el hablar, en cambio, me era natural y, como todas las cosas que se hacen según la naturaleza, tenía sus interrupciones, sus eclipses. La palabra misma es discontinua, pero sólo se hace sensible cuando hay que formarla y entonces ya no es una cosa de la naturaleza, sino eso que unos pocos hombres se esfuerzan en hacer y que llaman pensar.

Pero yo nunca he pensado; hay que decidirse a ello, ponerse, y ahora me doy cuenta de que todos mis movimientos han sido naturales, atraídos invisiblemente como las mareas que tánto conozco — siempre el agua — por un sol invisible, por una luna apenas señalada, blanca; la luna que nace blanca sobre un cielo azul, continuación del mar la luna navegante y sola, reina destituída, reina más que diosa de un mundo que ya fué y se perdió. Reina convertida en diosa de los muertos, de las sombras, de los condenados al silencio y de las almas abandonadas.

Madre de las almas... Se hundían en mí cuando se quedaban sin cuerpo. Y padecía yo sus dolores, aquéllos que no habían tenido nombre. Todo su no-ser; lo que habían dejado de sentir, y lo que habían dejado vagar fuera de sí mismas. Pues no todas las almas han sostenido la carga del destino que sobre ellas pesaba, ni han recogido el sentir de las entrañas que estaban a su cuidado, ni han sido el guía invisible que atrae el pensamiento y da dictamen en los pasos secretos de la vida. Al separarse de sus cuerpos, caen como un ciego que se hubiese vuelto de repente, sin la ayuda de nuevos sentidos. Y les duele el cuerpo que dejaron y esa su historia con la que no saben qué hacer, llena de interrupciones y paréntesis como tela hecha al descuido. Y aquel dolor que no apuraron, y el amor posible y apenas entrevisto en un instante de infinita flaqueza, vagan en torno suyo, revolotean como pájaros. Sin sede aún en el país de los muertos, débiles para atravesar su dintel, desvalidas como en el momento de nacer, venían a mí. Y no me daba cuenta al principio, y hube de soportar los reproches de mi extraño dolor, no semejante al de nadie, cuando alguien cerca de mí o unido a mí por algún lazo moría.

Extraño, irreducible dolor que no se aplacaba ni hallaba consuelo.

Y mientras entonaban la salmodia ritual en que se enumeraban las virtudes que no siempre eran el relato fiel de la verdad, la pobre alma palpitaba a ciegas, sin reconocerse. Y todo lo más siente el ambiguo consuelo del animal a quien se acaricia un instante, mientras es devuelto a su rincón a sufrir a solas su dolor de bestia extraña a todo. Esos consuelos que el vivo regala para quedar libre de este lado de la vida, defendiéndose de acercarse al umbral de la muerte, de acompañar al alma desencarnada por algunos instantes siquiera; de prestarle un hueco, esa cueva maternal que la misma tierra procura. Pues ante la muerte los vivos oponen la resistencia de su tiempo impenetrable. Así la muerte penetrará en ellos un

día también, desde afuera y no como el mar que inunda y lleva lejos.

Los he llevado sobre mí a mis muertos, sintiendo su peso, esa torpeza de su nuevo estado; los he retenido mientras no podían marcharse. Y conocí las penas ajenas a mi condición, tan ajenas que, a veces, yo no podía saber a qué error, a qué debilidad eran debidas, o a qué verdad. Me hundía en mí misma, haciéndome oscura, me llenaba de muerte y los vivos huían de mi lado. Y sentía mi alma anónima que sostenía a aquellas almas a medio despertar que ardían ya con esa luz del proprio fuego; que comenzaban a reducirse.

Tuve un sueño: una serpiente avanzaba hacia mí; no era mala ni traía quizá ninguna gota de veneno. Pero era serpiente y quería vivir conmigo; y yo temí porque ya nadie vendría a visitarme. Un hombre la partió de un tajo en dos y yo entonces vi su alma, sobre la tierra, débil, blanquecina, que temblaba como alguien que se ha quedado desnudo de repente; y estaba triste y nadie se iba a acercar a recogerla. Me encontré diciéndola: « Alma de la serpiente, estás triste sin tu cuerpo, ven que yo te llevaré en mi alma »; al mismo tiempo que vi la mía como un disco blanco sosteniendo muchas almas y casi me arrepentí de aquel ofrecimiento, porque me asaltó el doble temor de no poder con ella también, aunque era débil y pequeña, y de que su veneno se me transfiriese. Pero la piedad fué más fuerte y, ya sin palabras, me incliné y ella subió al lado de las otras. Despierta me acordaba de vez en cuando, y acechaba mis movimientos, mis pensamientos; no noté nada ajeno.

Por entonces comencé a ver, en ocasiones dormida y en ocasiones despierta, de un modo diferente. Un árbol — es con lo que primero me ocurrió —, un árbol que veía constantemente, entre las columnas del templo: un pino del mar, alto, con una copa dividida y como derramándose, erguido y solo entre un grupo de cipreses que no le quitaban el ser protagonista de aquel simbólico bosque. Y lo vi sin mirarlo, en un medio diverso del aire, más transparente y vivo; era el medio propio de la visión, el medio de visibilidad donde las cosas

no aparecen nunca. Y la diferencia era tal como si hasta en tonces lo hubiese visto sólo de bulto. No era más real por eso, era simplemente verdadero. Era el árbol solo y único era de verdad y estaba aquí, esto es lo más difícil de poner en palabras. De haber yo podido pensar, lo hubiera pensado pero me tuve que conformar con ver así, de vez en cuando. Otra noche vi dormida, pero no en sueños, en ese espacio donde las cosas son enteramente lo que son, en una claridad sin resto alguno de opacidad, la luna blanca, ensimismada; su luz no irradiaba ni tenía fosforescencia; no resplandecía ni brillaba, era la luna y su luz quieta. Reposo y movimiento en relación con aquello son cosas relativas, estados, pasividades. Sufren las cosas su reposo y su movimiento, y por ello no son del todo visibles. ¿Cómo ha de ser visto perfectamente lo que está padeciendo, sujeto a alteración, disminuído en su reposo; excediéndose en el movimiento? En ese medio de visibilidad ni se mueven ni están quietas las cosas; no sufren estado alguno, respiran en la luz, en una luz que no vibra ni por ello está muerta.

Aquella luna blanca dejaba caer su claridad. Y una esfera blanca, no sé de qué materia — porque materia no la había — una esfera blanca, la esfera, correspondía con ella. Al despertarme, miré al cielo y frente a mí la luna estaba en igual posición. La había visto. Solamente había yo inventado la esfera blanca.

Después vi una escena humana que había sucedido hacía mucho tiempo, y que se había perpetuado por un relato en verso. Y comprendí que el poeta la había visto así. Era distinta pues se trataba de un suceso histórico, que es otra clase de movimiento. Esto lo ví como si estuviera bajo el agua. Y en el agua había zonas de diferente luz y densidad. Y así, la imagen real daba origen a varias imágenes fragmentarias que se desvanecían. Algunas se repetían siempre; otras eran cosas de un instante ¡Cuántos rítmos extraños que se entrecruzaban!

Siempre sentí las cosas lejanas, las que se desarrollan en otros tiempos y en otros espacios, sucesos que ocurren en algún lugar diferente del nuestro, instantes de realidad que aquí se consumen en duraciones como desiertos. Y así, he atravesado varios que señalan las verdaderas épocas de mi vida y han ido marcando mi edad.

Uno de esos desiertos fué el de los sueños. Una noche se me apareció la estrella que tántas veces había visto reinando en el cielo, sola, antes de la salida del sol. El amor que pone fin a la noche y que alumbra sus primeros pasos. Me sabía ligada a ella. Y la ví, bajo la sombra de los anillos de Cronos, oscurecida por ellos. Así mi vida; amor atravesado por el tiempo, partido por el tiempo. Y comencé a comprender; no era un suceso únicamente mío.

Y la vi entonces desdoblada; no una sino dos Afroditas separadas por el río del tiempo, por los anillos del tiempo. Y desde entonces supe que era esa la espiral que atravesaba todos los momentos en que creí haber logrado todo. Un instante de identidad, y después la división inexorable y la sombra.

He caminado sola, enredándome angustiosamente en esos anillos, trabado mi paso. Y ahora que ya se escurren en mí y me dejan libre, vuelvo los ojos a ti, amor, mi ensombrecida estrella.

Durante un tiempo estuve cerrada. Fué mi época de estatua. Alguien me llamó Afrodita Hermética; mi belleza, según él, no era visible para todos; sólo se abría en ciertos momentos. Y un día que me encontraron desnuda al borde de la espuma, adormilada, me confundieron con ella misma ¡extraña cosa! Pero yo me envolví en mi manto violeta y al recogerme los cabellos, húmedos del agua espesa y amarga, estaban ya grises.

¿Dependía yo de mi alma? Veo ahora que no. Bien pronto me fué arrebatada y llevada lejos. Ahora que me asiste casi visible, lo sé.

Ahora me veo así, tal como era: una presencia casi pura para todo el que venía a buscarme. No entendía después el no ser yo, yo misma la buscada, no entendía; pero seguía brotando de mí la presencia inagotable y cada vez más pura. Era algo que de mí se desprendía, mientras yo quedaba detrás y encerrada en mi oscuridad de herida; tal el manantial en que todos beben y se refrescan y se vuelven puros y blandos... Y también lo que hay detrás de una voz que se oye a lo lejos... Había sido por lo visto siempre así, desde muchacha; alguien que llora sin consuelo. La muchacha que llora enterrada viva... Y su llanto es agua; llanto de una herida que nadie descubre, sobre la que nadie se inclina sino a beber; la vida misma en su presencia primera: el agua.

Un sabio oí decir que había hablado de que todas las cosas son agua. Yo no entiendo de eso; ni sé lo que son las cosas; ni si las hay. En todas la cosas hay agua, eso sí. Y a unas las hieren para que brote y se vuelvan madres de vida. Otras se deshacen por el fuego en agua. Pues la vida fué raptada y hecha prisionera. Y hay quien la rinde y hay quien no. Y siempre brota de una herida. Es el amor. Hay vida, amor aprisionado, en todo, pero hay quien lo retiene; teme, si vive, morir.

Y un día en que me quedé más que nunca hundida en mi oscuridad sentí el nacimiento de la música, la música naciente. Es el día en que comencé a morir, oía dentro de mí la vieja canción del agua, y ví el fantasma del agua en aquel género de visión que entonces comenzó. Comencé a cantar entre dientes por obedecer, en la oscuridad absoluta que no había hasta entonces conocido. La vieja canción del agua todavía no nacida, confundida con el gemido de la que nace, el gemido de la madre que da a luz una y otra vez para acabar de nacer ella misma, entremezclado con el vagido de lo que nace, la vida parturiente. Me sentí acunada por este lloro que era también canto tan lejos y en mí. Porque nunca nada era mío del todo. ¿No tendría yo dueño tampoco?

La música no tiene dueño. Pues los que van a ella no la poseen nunca. Han sido por ella primero poseídos, después iniciados. Y yo no sabía que una persona pudiera ser así, al modo de la música, que posee porque penetra mientras se desprende de su fuente, también una herida. Se abre la música sólo en algunos lugares inesperadamente, cuando errante, el alma sola se siente desfallecer sin dueño. Y en esta soledad nadie aparece, nadie parecía cuando me sentí en mi soledad última; el amado sin nombre siquiera. Alguien que me enamoró, no sé, allá en la noche, en una única noche, hasta el alba. Nunca más apareció. Ya nadie más pudo encontrarme.

Y me quedé al borde del alba. Y allí quedé temblando de frío. Un olor de violetas me envolvía; me acompañaba siempre como huella de aquel paso. Se desvanecía por mucho tiempo, pero volvía, y hasta alguien lo percibió una vez y vino hacia mí, se me acercó cuando ya nadie me venía a buscar. Era como si me hubiese reconocido. Pero él era para mí perfectamente opaco. Ya no importaba tampoco esto. Era un hombre color de tierra y me dió confianza. Había hecho una guerra y quería lavarse ahí en la fuente. Lo dejé solo mucho tiempo y después hablamos hasta el amanecer. No recuerdo lo que le dije. Y me dejó inquieta y vacía este hombre tan ávido, sediento en todos sus poros; bebía mis palabras y parecía llevárselas consigo, pues tampoco él sabía escribir.

Y no hablé más, creo. Después llegó aquel niño que un día se fué cuando dejaba de ser rubio. Y después ya sólo la cabra. Estaba aquí hace un momento, inocente como una constelación no descubierta; amiga.

Asistida ahora por mi alma antigua, mi alma primera al fin recobrada, y por tánto tiempo perdida. Ella, la perdidiza, al fin volvió por mí. Y ahora, comprendo que ella ha sido la enamorada. Y que yo he andado por la vida tan sólo

de paso, lejana de mí misma. Y de ella venían las palabras sin dueño, que todos bebían sin dejarme apenas nada a cambio. Yo era la voz de esa mi antigua alma.

Y ella, a medida que consumaba su amor allá donde yo no podía verla, me iba iniciando a través del dolor y del abandono. Por eso nadie podía amarme, mientras yo iba sabiendo del amor. Y yo misma tampoco amaba. Sólo una noche hasta el alba. Y allí quedé esperándola. Me despertaba con la aurora, si es que había dormido. Y creía que ya había llegado; yo, ella, él... Salía el sol y el día caía como una condena sobre mí. No, no era todavía.

VICENTE ALEIXANDRE

LA APARECIDA

I
EN TIERRA

Tenía ojos grandes.
(Tristeza mía pura, ¿quién te quería?)
Tenía boca dulce, ojos que miraban muy lejos, frente pálida.
(¿Quién te tenía con tu cabeza echada sobre su hombro?)

Apenas parecías de uno,
aunque uno te retuviera dócil por la cintura.
Eras frágil como el suspiro que casi aquí alcanza.
Suave, como la hoja que resbala en otoño.

Pero no te quedabas. No recogida nunca sobre la tierra.
A veces dormías,
y era como si un soplo de polvo tenue te hubiese llevado.

II
LA MANO

La mano no era grande. El hueso expresivo
allí era tan delicado que no pesaría.
Movía lentamente los ojos cuando miraba.
Y quedaba la mano suspensa

y, en el aire vivo,
parecía que, un momento solo, transpareciese .

Pero no era así. Porque era cálida
y temblaba, pero no como un pájaro,
sino como la pluma dulce que nos dejase.

La palabra escapaba...
Pero reteniamos temerosamente la mano, o su huída.

III
SU BESO

No. Su cabeza sobre mi hombro
se humanizaba repentinamente, casi con miedo.
Y besándola cerraba mis ojos sobre su boca,
sintiendo en la finísima piel del labio
el raudo latido que se azoraba.

Apenas paloma, apenas cierva,
apenas sombra de un junco triste,
un instante se apaciguaba,
con casi forma bellísima entre mis brazos.

DIEGO DE MESA

UNA MUERTE

A veces, al atravesar un pueblo, se le perdía, y cuando pensaba ya salir al campo se encontraba con las bardas que encerraban la fronda de un huerto, con una vieja iglesia abandonada, con las tapias altas del cementerio.

La buscaba nervioso por plazas y callejas creyendo siempre encontrarla en las más anchas, desesperándose al salir de nuevo a un callejón sucio y polvoriento. Se detenía un instante para pensar, para desandar el camino andado y comenzar de nuevo desde el principio, desde donde la había dejado. Más sereno, buscaba las calles empedradas hasta que de pronto, sin saber cómo, sentía el trote regular de la motocicleta. Seguía entonces, cuidadoso, el adoquinado, aumentando la velocidad a medida que iban espaciándose las casas, y por fin la veía ante él, tendida, limpia, lisa y porosa — en el campo desnudo, sin casas ya, sin bardas —, ¡la carretera!

Y dejando atrás toda resistencia, sus cuidados en los últimos muros, pegado al sillín y el torso suelto, se abandonaba a la atracción irresistible, oprimiendo entre sus rodillas el cuerpo de la motocicleta, sintiendo que era la carretera entera la que temblaba entre sus piernas.

Y era la posesión del campo todo, cuya variedad se extendía y como desplegaba delante de sus ojos, hundiéndose y fundiéndose en esa raya gris donde era uno para él y

por la que le penetraba sin llegar nunca a la entrega completa.

Había momentos en que lo abandonaba casi, en lo más alto de una subida, para lanzarse luego lleno de amor y deseo en su busca; y el campo le huía sonriente colina abajo.

Y cuando estaba a punto de ser suyo, para prolongar el placer, se detenía; apoyaba la motocicleta contra un arbol y se acostaba cara al cielo en un prado, de espaldas a él, pero acariciándolo y sintiendo en las manos la caricia de sus hierbas.

Era entonces cuando entornaba los ojos para recrearlo, y no podía. Veía el paisaje tierno de verdes delicados, con árboles y lirios, que había visto de niño en un tapiz, cuando aún no conocía el campo. Y por muchos años imaginó que era así; el cielo de un rosa comido por el tiempo y, en lo alto, un agujero azul de Gloria, festoneado de simétricas nubes, por donde asomaban ángeles con violines y estrellas. A un lado San Juan, sostenido por el arcángel, al otro lado la Prostituta, coronada de oro y perlas, sobre la bestia sexual de las siete cabezas.

La Prostituta; algo de hermoso y de horrible. Más tarde, ya en el colegio, se le confundía su imagen con la de la Gorgona Medusa; belleza y repulsión. Dolor, todavía no.

Se incorporaba un poco, abría bien los ojos y, como quien enfoca sus prismáticos, las cosas volvían a su ser: el prado verde, el cielo azul y un fondo de árboles sin lirios.

De nuevo sobre la motocicleta, se le reaparecía la Prostituta y la bestia de las siete cabezas.

Pero la carretera, ávida, le absorbía y él se lanzaba por ella al campo sintiendo violenta, en su frente, la misma brisa que ondulaba suavemente los trigales.

Otras veces, tendido junto al río, inclinaba su cabeza hasta tocar la superficie tersa del agua, no para beber, sólo para recibir en su boca la savia fresca del campo, el beso limpio de la tierra.

Con los labios y las mejillas húmedos aún volvía a lanzarse en su carrera. Un aliento tibio y fuerte, casi como el roce de unas manos, le envolvía secándolo pronto, y él entreabría la boca para besarlo también.

Y se entristecía cuando una ciudad, un pueblo, venían a interrumpir su amoroso juego. Frente a las puertas de jardines y huertos le acometía el deseo de abrirlas, como quien abre una jaula para que vuelen los pájaros. Le dolían los pedazos de campo encerrados. Luego, fugazmente, creía encontrarlo en unos ojos verdes como la hierba tierna recién nacida, o en las manos oscuras, nudosas como raíces de arbol, de un campesino. Pero siempre se le escapaba allá, al otro lado de las casas.

Avignon había sido la última ciudad. Desde su alto castillo, como roca erguida sobre la roca viva, había contemplado los tejados que se hacinan en tropel dentro de las murallas, temerosos de perderse en el campo. Y salió a su encuentro por una de las puertas que miran al río.

Por mucho tiempo tuvo delante de los ojos, como arenilla extraña, la imagen del tapiz en que Luis XIV, igual que un repollo, escucha en medio de su corte las excusas que le lee el legado del Papa. Era la única visión que guardaba de su visita al castillo; ésa y el paisaje de tejados.

El campo húmedo y brillante fué poco a poco limpiándole el mirar. Y el aire se hacía más denso, más cálido, conforme avanzaba hacia la costa.

Corría y corría rasgando el paisaje para llegar al mar; para ver ese campo desnudo bañándose en la orilla, lamido por las ondas que dibujan claramente su forma.

Y la carretera llana, sonriente, se le entregaba con su misma pasión. Apenas se le ocultaba un momento en tímido repecho. Y él, como si le torciera la muñecas, aceleraba más y más, el cuerpo inclinado hacia adelante, la boca en busca de unos labios.

Rugiendo como el monstruo que guarda a la doncella, vió el camión que se le avalanzaba al doblar una curva. Parecía que había estado allí esperándole desde el principio. Tuvo el tiempo preciso de evitarlo, inclinándose peligrosamente delante casi de sus ruedas, y salir por un lado sintiendo en su hombro el fuego del roce de la bestia.

Había llegado el momento. La carretera se le revolvía

entre las piernas llamándole frenéticamente hacia sí. Y sin poder contener más su amor, rotas ya las esclusas del deseo, se hundió con violencia en el abrazo plano vertiendo en ella los jugos todos de su vida.

El, pegado a la tierra; los brazos abiertos cubriendo todo el campo. La motocicleta a un lado, como toro muerto.

Y otra vez el paisaje de árboles y lirios, y el cielo rosa que se hacía más y más intenso hasta teñir de rojo los verdes delicados.

San Juan a un lado, y el arcángel, y la Prostituta. La bestia sexual muerta como toro muerto. El tronco descabezado de la Medusa. Belleza, repulsión... y un dolor agudo que subía y subía hacia el agujero de la Gloria.

« ...Y cuando Perseo le hubo cortado la cabeza, surgió el gran Crisaor, con el caballo Pegaso. Y recibieron estos nombres, uno, porque había nacido junto a las aguas del Océano, y el otro, porque en sus manos tenía una espada de oro ».

* * *

Cuando llegaron los hombres le taparon la cabeza sin mirarle la cara; por temor de convertirse en piedras.

JORGE GUILLÉN

PENTECOSTÉS

Un viento de tormenta,
Tormenta sin nublado
De atmósfera,
Encendido fragor irresistible,
Sonó.
Y todos los discípulos,
Férvida compañía,
Alzaron las miradas
Hacia un tumulto de relampagueos.
El trance:
Algo que nos ocurre y no se entiende.
Un soplo superior al hombre asiste
— Con una violencia sin sentido
Que deslumbra y no alumbra —
Al hombre.

Miraban, esperaban
Los preparados a lo portentoso.
Y el tumulto de luz fulgió con luces.
Innumerables luces como lenguas
En vibración de fuego
Buscaban, descendían
Arrebatadamente.

Muy próximos
A las cabezas de los elegidos,
Aquellos muchos haces fogueantes
Eran cielo exaltado,
Un maná torrencial,
A golpes
Radiosos invasor,
Gloria que regalara
Secretos,
Penumbras de los rayos más remotos,
Revelación tal vez
De las últimas claves:
Inspiración, inspiración sagrada.

Y todos los creyentes
Llegaron a la cumbre de sus voces:
Lengua desconocida
Por los así parlantes
Con un vigor que exige
Su forma, su vocablo,
Caliente aún y más allá del fuego,
Sin gesticulaciones
— A través de las nubes peligrosas —
Don de la gran palabra,
Una alegría sin embriaguez,
Don de Espíritu Santo,
Aquella inspiración
Ascendía a verdades
Rectoras,
Superaba al vidente siempre humilde.

EMMANUEL CARBALLO

HABLA FULANITA

Y yo estaba confiada, creía, tenía fe en sus palabras. Hoy soy otra, desconfío, como los incrédulos no me persigno ante los hombres.

Los hombres son hombres, paran las orejas como las liebres, se quedan escuchando y dicen: « ésta ya me quiere, es mía », y se acercan, sin temor, creyendo que todo les pertenece con sólo alargar el brazo. Se endurecen, nos toman como si fuéramos frutas; sacan el pañuelo, lo extienden, lo alisan y nos ponen en el centro; son como las viejitas, miedosos, desconfiados; nos envuelven, nos arropan, hacen del pañuelo una bolita y nosotras quedamos allí, en el centro.

Un hombre, y la mujer sólo quiere un hombre. Pero los hombres son como las mentiras, llegan muy fácil, pero después se pudren, corrompen la carne.

A mí me tocó como a todas un hombre. Un hombre que se reblandecía cuando me tenía entre sus brazos; cuando me decía « amor »; cuando jugaba con mis dedos y no se cansaba de contarlos, de decir que eran como las ramas jóvenes, que los sentía tan suyos, tan adentro como los rayos de luz que entran, perfumados, por los vidrios de colores de la iglesia.

Nos conocimos una tarde. Yo caminaba despreocupada, alegre; veía la luna alta, borrosa; no pensaba en nada: tenía

el rostro ausente; iba nada más por la calle, porque a veces dan ganas de pasear por las calles. Iba envuelta en un vestido como todos los vestidos, sin importancia; creo que era verde... verde limón.

Me siguió primero unas cuadras. Después se me acercó y me dijo que ya me conocía, que yo era la Santa Eduviges colgada en su cuarto: alta, como de cera, de manos mansas con un cesto lleno de panes: « Pan bueno como sus ojos, como sus palabras ahora que me hable, que me diga que sí ».

Y qué iba a decirle yo, si se lo estaban diciendo hacía rato mis ojos, si lo estaba mirando como se mira al Santísimo con amor preocupado, cabizbajo, ¡como que una es pequeña cosa!

El amor, esa cosa rápida que nos deja como las cruces clavadas, altas. Amor como aquél que me contaban las monjitas, rápido, fuerte, intenso; amor de Saulo, rápido como un relámpago, eterno. ¡Pero el mío, ay, era amor por una criatura! Amor de mujer por un hombre. Por un hombre como él, de labios prontos y dulces. ¡Si yo era su Santa Eduviges, aquella de la estampa, si desde entonces me tenía prendida una lamparita!

Y qué sería ahora, ahora que yo estaba junto a él, que estabamos juntos, solos; sólo él y yo en el mundo; alejados, aparte, como si hubiera bajado una nube, como si nos estuviera cubriendo, separando de lo vulgar, de lo de todos los días.

Entonces yo tenía veintidós años. Me sentía ágil, nueva, como se sienten las palomas cuando emprenden por primera vez el vuelo. Tenía a mis padres, lo tenía todo. Era bonita. Lo recuerdo, sí, de nuevo lo estoy contemplando: « Fulanita tendrá fortuna — decía mi madre — así como es, bonita. No muy bonita, pero sí bonita. Con esa su nariz volverá locos a los hombres. Ya me los imagino siguiéndola, apurando el paso, llegando ansiosos ».

Así llegó Alejandro, ansioso como decía mi madre. Yo fuí para él una puerta abierta, no le costé trabajo. Dejé que llegara, más bien lo fuí aguardando; me habló, me dijo lo

que dicen ciertos hombres: palabras lentas, racimos de palabras; parece como si les pusieran alas para que llegaran prontas al corazón de la mujer. Así llegaron sus palabras, una por una, llenas de lo que él quería decirme. Las fué sacando, despacio, con cálculo, en el momento justo; me las entregó porque eran mías, porque él sabía que aceptarlas era para mí algo, algo grande, único. Desde entonces las conservo junto a mí. Son mías, son de Alejandro.

Sus palabras cambiaron mi vida, me hicieron otra. Ya no fuí más la muchacha « bonita », de nariz juiciosa, ligeramente soberbia. Fuí su Fulanita, la Fulanita que le aguardaba todas las noches fuera de sí, deshecha; y las noches llegaron, se fueron sucediendo. Alejandro me miraba largo, penetrante. Yo le decía: « Alejandro », y la voz se me iba, se quedaba inmóvil como las nubes cuando no hace aire. Nos quisimos mucho, hablamos de casarnos, de lo que al llegar a esto se habla. Se lo dijimos a mis padres. Alejandro era huérfano. Ellos dijeron por fin, después de mucho pensarlo, « está bueno ».

Alejandro trabajaba en una fábrica. Su sueldo era modesto, lo fuimos con trabajos ajustando, como ajustan las madres con paciencia las ropas que dejan sus hijos mayores a los últimos en llegar. Alejandro era dichoso, su risa era abierta, franca. Un día me dijo: « Fulanita, a tu lado la vida no transcurre, eres para mí ruido de alas, pasos quedos de pájaros pequeños; eres para mí lo que la oscuridad en las noches de invierno, una presencia maciza que se mete ansiosa por todos los rincones ».

Así era yo, como la oscuridad. Así me dejé ir sobre él, ansiosa, con mis alas grandes, indulgentes como las de un ángel. Quise cobijarlo con mi cuerpo, y él se dejaba, se acurrucaba en mí. Yo era feliz, me sentía dichosa.

Ahora todo es tan diferente, tan descolorido. Todo lo veo con otros ojos; con unos ojos fríos, sin brillo. Mi madre dice que todo es igual, que nada ha cambiado. Y es cierto, mis ojos son los que han cambiado, soy yo la que ha cambiado. Las cosas no existen, cuando existen son feas, desabridas; una

es la que les da color, forma; una es la que les da vida. Yo le dí vida a la noche, la hice tibia, oscura, olorosa a jazmines; olía a jazmines porque estaba enamorada, era oscura porque mis ojos no veían más que sus ojos negros, era tibia porque el amor es tibio, porque el amor le da a una el tibio calor de las palomas.

Alejandro es como todos los hombres. Yo no estoy resentida, ni mucho menos; pienso en él como en algo pasado, bueno. Sucedió lo que sucede cuando una mujer se encuentra a un hombre como todos los hombres: inconstante, falto de escrúpulos, que juega con una, que le dice cosas nomás porque sí, nomás porque es hombre.

Alejandro se fué; se fué como se van los niños al cielo, sin decírnoslo; juntó, una a una, todas sus palabras; las fué haciendo bolita; sacó su pañuelo en el que yo era ya una fruta madura; me puso a un lado, con atención; agarró cuidadosamente sus palabras, las colocó en su pañuelo, donde antes era mi lugar; las alisó, les dió las gracias e hizo de ellas lo que hizo de mí cuando era suya, las puso con todo comedimiento, cerca, muy cerca de su corazón duro y caliente.

OCTAVIO PAZ

EL RÍO

La ciudad desvelada circula por mi sangre como una abeja.
Y el avión que traza un gemido en forma de S larga, los tranvías que se derrumban en esquinas remotas,
ese árbol cargado de injurias que alguien sacude a media noche en la plaza,
los ruidos que ascienden y estallan y los que se deslizan y cuchichean en la oreja un secreto que repta,
abren lo oscuro, precipicios de aes y oes, túneles de vocales taciturnas,
galerías que recorro con los ojos vendados, el alfabeto somnoliento cae en el hoyo como un río de tinta,
y la ciudad va y viene y su cuerpo de piedra se hace añicos al llegar a mi sien,
toda la noche, uno a uno, estatua a estatua, fuente a fuente, piedra a piedra, toda la noche
sus pedazos se buscan en mi frente, toda la noche la ciudad habla dormida por mi boca
y es un discurso incomprensible y jadeante, un tartamudeo de aguas y piedra batallando, su historia.

Detenerse un instante, detener a mi sangre que va y viene, va y viene y no dice nada,
sentado sobre mí mismo como el yoguín a la sombra de la higuera, como Buda a la orilla del río, detener el instante,

un solo instante, sentado a la orilla del tiempo, borrar mi
imagen del río que habla dormido y no dice nada y me
lleva consigo,
sentado a la orilla detener el río, abrir el instante,
penetrar por sus salas atónitas hasta su centro de agua.
beber en la fuente inagotable, ser la cascada de sílabas
azules que cae de los labios de piedra,
sentado a la orilla de la noche como Buda a la orilla de sí
mismo ser el parpadeo del instante,
el incendio y la destrucción y el nacimiento del instante y
la respiración de la noche fluyendo enorme a la orilla
del tiempo,
decir lo que dice el río, larga palabra semejante a labios,
larga palabra que no acaba nunca,
decir lo que dice el tiempo en duras frases de piedra, en
vastos ademanes de mar cubriendo mundos.
A mitad del poema me sobrecoge siempre un gran desamparo,
todo me abandona,
no hay nadie a mi lado, ni siquiera esos ojos que desde atrás
contemplan lo que escribo,
no hay atrás ni adelante, la pluma se rebela, no hay comienzo
ni fin, tampoco hay muro que saltar,
es una explanada desierta el poema, lo dicho no está dicho,
lo no dicho es indecible,
torres, terrazas devastadas, babilonias, un mar de sal negra,
un reino ciego,
No,
detenerme, callar, cerrar los ojos hasta que brote de mis
párpados una espiga, un surtidor de soles,
y el alfabeto ondule largamente bajo el viento del sueño y
la marea crezca en una ola y la ola rompa el dique,
esperar hasta que el papel se cubra de astros y sea el poema
un bosque de palabras enlazadas,
No,
no tengo nada que decir, nadie tiene nada que decir, nada ni
nadie excepto la sangre,

nada sino este ir y venir de la sangre, este escribir sobre lo escrito y repetir la misma palabra en mitad del poema,
sílabas de tiempo, letras rotas, gotas de tinta, sangre que va y viene y no dice nada y me lleva consigo.

Y digo mi rostro inclinado sobre el papel y alguien a mi lado escribe mientras la sangre va y viene,
y la ciudad va y viene por su sangre, quiere decir algo, el tiempo quiere decir algo, la noche quiere decir,
toda la noche el hombre quiere decir una sola palabra, decir al fin su discurso hecho de piedras desmoronadas,
y aguzo el oído, quiero oír lo que dice el hombre, repetir lo que dice la ciudad a la deriva,
toda la noche las piedras rotas se buscan a tientas en mi frente, toda la noche pelea el agua contra la piedra,
las palabras contra la noche, la noche contra la noche, nada ilumina el opaco combate,
el choque de las armas no arranca un relámpago a la piedra, una chispa a la noche, nadie da tregua,
es un combate a muerte entre inmortales, ay, dar marcha atrás, parar el río de sangre, el río de tinta,
parar el río de las palabras, remontar la corriente y que la noche vuelta sobre sí misma muestre sus entrañas de oro ardiendo,
que el agua muestre su corazón que es un racimo de espejos ahogados, un árbol de cristal que el viento desarraiga
(y cada hoja del árbol vuela y centellea y se pierde en una luz cruel como se pierden las palabras en la imagen del poeta),
que el tiempo se cierre y sea su herida una cicatriz invisible, apenas una delgada línea sobre la piel del mundo,
que las palabras depongan armas y se cierren y sea el poema un resplandor implacable que avanza,
el llano después del incendio, el pecho lunar de un mar petrificado que no refleja nada
sino la extensión extendida, el espacio acostado sobre sí mismo, las alas inmensas desplegadas,

y sea todo como la llama que se esculpe y se hiela en la roca
de entrañas transparentes,
piedra de sol contra la noche de piedra, piedra contra el
silencio y la palabra, piedra contra el jadeo.

Y el río remonta su curso, repliega sus velas, recoge sus imá-
genes y se interna en sí mismo.

J. R. WILCOCK

FIESTA DE SAN JUAN

Lento como un animal
que gira con mansedumbre
atado a un poste central,
hoy llega el sol a la cumbre
de la eclíptica boreal,
y acatando con desgano
su trayectoria diuturna
inclina otra vez la urna
de donde fluye el verano
sobre San Juan Laterano.

Hoy con fuegos de artificio
todo el hemisferio norte
celebra alegre el solsticio;
la hembra escoge consorte
y se pone a su servicio,
concibiendo al resplandor
de esas iluminaciones
las nuevas generaciones
que de un pretexto de amor
hará nacer el calor.

Es el momento fecundo;
mientras tanto, los países
del otro extremo del mundo
observan las nubes grises
del frío meditabundo
que baja de las alturas
y oleada tras oleada,
liviano como la helada,
va esparciendo sus basuras
por las ciudades a oscuras.

JAIME GARCÍA TERRÉS

EL PARQUE DE MONTSOURIS: ELEGÍA BÁRBARA

I

Al averno frutal de la memoria
desfilan héroes amargos:
Ellos
no saben; yacen
apenas en la yerba; dicen
el día que nos miraba,
y la violenta procesión
— ésa, sin dueño —
de núbiles colores y proezas vecinas.

Íbamos todos.
Mal rasurados, flojos,
veinte francos (o diez) en el bolsillo.
Íbamos paso a paso. Compartiendo
los rumores del parque.
Y cada uno de nosotros era
un puñado de sombra
labrada por señuelos encendidos.

Allí, junto a la yerba, nos veíamos
presas de una aventura rebelde y cotidiana.
Ya sonaban las horas en el cuerno del aire;
ya dormía su lengua la colina.

II

Y luego — desceñidas —
islas de viento repentinas
que azuzaban el prado.

...aquellas islas.
La muerte las traía quedamente.
Brillaban en los charcos. Allí. Junto a la yerba.
Al alcance del grito, o del relámpago.
Eran ecos llovidos a la boca y los ojos.
Letras, imágenes, de pronto.

A veces una carta que venía desde lejos.
(Mira cómo resbala tu voz entre mis dedos.
Cómo borda un riachuelo
de ausencia. Tu voz húmeda,
inerme y fugitivo huésped...)
O si no, los retratos
improvisados
en un rincón del tiempo. Y las moradas
cuyas puntas araban el follaje.

Aquellas islas.
Hiriendo, desbordándose.
Semejantes a ráfagas vencidas
sobre limbos de miedo.

III

Y la noche llegaba
con su valiente sabor a tabaco
denso. También recinto
de la dulce miseria.
Llegaba la noche.
Latía
una chusma de estrellas en el fondo:
Todos dijimos en aquel momento,
una y más veces,
nuestro vasto deseo.
Si los aromas se volvieran cuerpos.
Si un lápiz de mentiras sepultara
el sueño, y nos lo diera
— vuelto lumbre — de nuevo
a nuestros labios.
Si mil rápidos soles despertaran
heno de luz a la corteza
llana.

La noche nos reía
todo su duelo en plena cara.
Larga virtud sedienta. Nos veía
más allá de sus cánticos sin rumbo.
Y tendía las manos implacables
cultivando, ya grávida, los ritos
opacos de la fronda.

ANTONIO SOUZA VIANA

EL NEGRO

I

En la retina del negro dormido el brillo del mar, en su sueño el azul de las olas en marejadas, hundiéndole en sopores de caliente tierra, a la sombra de las palmas.

Duerme el negro en su selva. Por la vereda, tangente a su talón, caen las hojas en los centros de luz y en las sombras que la enramada causa y que cambian a giros de viento caliente que abraza los miembros del que duerme.

Por la vereda se alejó de la aldea y de ella viene un tamtam que se funde en el todo de luces y verdes, cálidos y sombríos; tonos y sueños del negro y las bestias alertas y despiertas, de la flor por abrirse, y la angustia del ataque inesperado.

Ojos clarísimos miran al negro dormido, ojos de transparente cristal animal, caliente mirada ingenua que espera, preparada a toda sorpresa, y en los músculos agilidad acumulada para las cumbres y las copas.

El agua canta lejos y fundida da renuevo a las respiraciones cautelosas.

En la aldea, los techos de las chozas son geometría de picos, baja, para las nubes y los montes que con desgana o persistencia, son formas de equilibrio.

La paja ya reseca es albergue de insectos que chirrían en la luz (sus antenas, entre las briznas de paja).

A la sombra del interior, el piso suavizado, muelen los granos las mujeres y al sol, por los umbrales, hay sonido de collares y de dientes blancos.

Los negros ríen en el continente.

Un negro duerme un poco lejos de los suyos.

Hay una bestia que se mira en el agua, un poco lejos del negro y en el reflejo hay una melena de estrictos rizos y una lengua de suavidad de carne. Los ojos miran su figura y las garras en la yerba se retienen.

La bestia se mira: el negro duerme.

El tam-tam se llega suave por las frutas plenas de puntitos y por el agua.

Si la bestia durmiera tumbada en la caliente tierra y el negro bebiera de aquella agua que refleja, el tam-tam llamaría a una paz, plena de color.

II

En el sueño del negro las ondas se encrespan para dar lugar a una calma luminosa. En ella las aguas de transparencia muestran al fondo negras manchas que como peces de temor aparecen con sobresalto.

El agua es azul.

El negro se incorpora en su sueño y la fiera vierte su aliento por las matas, que caen verdes y fláccidas por los hombros del negro.

Hay un remolino en la clara agua, un pez oscuro muestra sus absortos ojos y su muda boca quiere pronunciar.

¡¡No!!

La fiera sonríe y sus dientes como pequeñas joyas en la gruta de sus fauces muestran sus picos.

¡¡No!! ¡¡No!! ¡¡No!!

El negro de ojos de pez bailotea en la vereda.
La bestia sonríe y comba su cuello mostrando su melena.
El negro gesticula
La bestia se lanza

III

La mano del negro, los dedos entre los rizos.

Desnudo el negro.

La fiera y el negro se extasían en la lucha.

En lenguaje de gestos ambos por vivir. Por vivir más. Por seguir viviendo.

La bestia se miraba en el agua. El negro soñaba en ella, azul marejada. Lucha por el azul, intensificar el azul, más agua, más bestia. ¿Querrá la bestia de nuevo mirarse en el agua? ¿Querrá el negro seguir soñando?

Y el tam-tam les llega a ambos. El negro lo escucha y su mano se refuerza en los rizos: la bestia carga y su árida lengua se enjuaga de carne negra.

IV

La lucha es brevísima. Será brevísima (en las constelaciones un negro luchando con una bestia).

¡¡No!! ¡¡No!! ¡¡No!!

Y la bestia se hipnotiza con este No repetido y melodioso y sus ojos se dulcifican de certidumbre.

El negro huele a carne, carne de hombre con miedo, carne de selva.

Y la mano y la melena son el vértice de un remolino en la selva: los árboles y la luz por ellos filtrada, en ellos convergen y las altísimas aves de rapiña trazan el círculo máximo.

¡¡No!! ¡¡No!! ¡¡No!!

Negro color de tierra embebida y ciega, tierra de verdes, como si Adán hubiera permanecido dormido, mientras todo en su derredor se creaba con pujanza, y el rayo de sol primero en su piel quemara con negro brillo.

¡¡No!! ¡¡No!! y la mano se enamora aún más de la melena. Mano que trazó senderos (primero con la vista; negro mirando en la brumosa selva: « de aquí donde estoy a allá donde vislumbro un sendero »). Las manos del negro elevadas al cielo en vértigo de adoración: una trunca pirámide, un brillante rostro de rojos y cadmios, una disciplinada greca repetida como letanía.

El aliento del negro en las selvas de antes. Su torso por los troncos de las palmeras, mismo brillo, mismo al tacto del viento.

Y la bestia carga y algún músculo en el brazo cede intuitivo.

¡¡No!! ¡¡No!! ¡¡No!!

V

En el cerebro de la bestia, música de negaciones y de tam-tam.

En la bestia, el caos de azules, de aguas; y el crudo reclamo de sangre: brotará de esta carne negra un chorro tibio de defensa y en mi lengua habrá de nuevo sabor de selvas.

Su mano me acaricia la melena y su danza me comunica avisos de huída. El sigilo de los peces y el batir de alas en mi siesta. Dormiré mi sueño, satisfecho, y el agua, ya morada, ocultará luces de las presas por venir.

VI

En el negro el vértigo del pánico e intentos de diálogo con el miedo que se prensa a sus fibras y le dicta su baile estático.

Un hambre se inculca en el torso y un deseo de descanso en su nuca y un sueño se posa en sus párpados y un caos de azules submarinos vibra modulado por sus ojos.

De súbito un rayo amarillo cruza su paisaje y un color nuevo por sus venas sáltale al cerebro que gira ya muy alto.

No, No, No,

y su voz ya consintiendo, dulcifica las fauces de la bestia que le hiere, y el chorro de sangre en su garganta le llega en borbotones mansos.

La bestia toma al negro yacente que la niega dulce y los tam-tames se van por el agua.

El negro abrazado a la melena disminuye su presión y con languidez entra al paisaje de la bestia.

JAIME GIL DE BIEDMA

LAS AFUERAS

I

La noche se afianza
sin respiro, lo mismo que un esfuerzo,
más despacio. Sin brisa
benévola que en un instante aviva
el tácito cansancio, precipita
la clausura del sueño.
Desde luces iguales
un alto muro de ventanas vela.
Carne a solas insomne, cuerpos
como la mano cercenada yacen,
se asoman, buscan el amor del aire
— y la brasa que apuran ilumina
Ojos donde no duerme
la ansiedad, la infinita esperanza con que aflige
la noche, cuando vuelve.

II

Mirad la noche del adolescente.
Atrás quedaron las solicitudes
del día, su familia de temores,

y la distancia pasa en avenida
de memorias o tumbas sin ciudad,
arrabales confusos lentamente

apagados. La noche se afianza
— hasta los cielos cada vez contigua
la sien late en el centro del silencio.

Bajo materia de rumor la ausencia
se reparte y regresa hacia los ojos
sin sueño arriba sensitivos. Algo

que debe de ser brisa — como un rastro
de frescura borrándose — se exhala
desde el balcón por donde entró la noche.

Su sigiloso peso de tiniebla
roza la piel exasperada, insiste.
Las yemas de los párpados avivan.

Y la noche se llega hasta los ojos,
inquiere las inmóviles pupilas,
golpea en lo más tierno que aun resiste

en el instante de ceder, irrumpe
cuerpo adentro, la noche, derramada
y corre, despertando cavidades

detenidas, sustancias, cauces secos,
lo mismo que un torrente de mercurio,
y se disipa recorriendo el cuerpo:

es ella misma cuerpo, carne, párpado
adelgazado hasta el dolor, latido
que mucha muerte insomne conmemora,

forma sensible de la ausencia. Ciego
de noche absorta gira el pensamiento.
Y la rosa de rejalgar, allí

donde fué la memoria, se levanta:
cabeza de corrientes hacia el sueño
total del otro lado de la noche.

PIER PAOLO PASOLINI

RECIT

Com'era nuovo nel sole Monteverde vecchio!
Con la mano, ferito, mi facevo specchio

per guardare intorno viali e strade in salita
vivi di gente nuova nella sua vecchia vita.

Giunsi nella piazza, accaldato e tremante,
ché gelo e sole insieme il quartiere accecante

sbiancavano con muta ed estasiata noia.
Ricco era il quartiere, ma popolana gioia

ne invadeva interrati ed attici con voci
vaghe ma violente, canti lieti e feroci

di garzoni, di serve e d'operai perduti
su bianche impalcature, tra bianchi rifiuti.

Come non sentire, con la vita il cuore
esser diverso e uno, essere gelo e sole?

Come non sentire ch'è pura gratitudine
per il mondo anche l'essere umiliati e nudi?

Mi aspettava nel sole dell'arida piazzetta.
l'amico, come incerto... Ah che cieca fretta

nei miei passi, che cieca la mia corsa leggera.
Il lume del mattino fu lume della sera;

subito me ne avvidi. Era troppo vivo
il marron dei suoi occhi, falsamente giulivo...

Mi disse ansioso e mite la notizia.
Ma fu più umana, Attilio, l'umana ingiustizia

se prima di ferirmi è passata per te,
e il primo moto di dolore che

fece sera del giorno, fu pel tuo dolore.
Intanto nulla era mutato sotto il fresco sole.

Anzi, l'indorarsi quieto del mezzogiorno
pareva eternare ogni cosa all'intorno.

Rifui solo: seguii con l'occhio l'auto
sparire con lui, nell'aria che ogni smalto

aveva perso ed era aria, soltanto aria,
l'aria in cui si vive, ignorati ed amari,

ogni giorno, mangiando silenziosi la vita,
sia ripugnante o dolce, lieta o nemica.

Com'era estraneo ora, ogni allegro grido,
per chi, ora, andava lungo un diverso lido.

Il guizzo di rossore che al sole occhieggiava
da una maglia o uno straccio per la sperduta strada,

era sangue colante dal petto ferito
d'un ignaro animale, stanato, inseguito...

Ché intanto il più recente giorno del creato
dorava il quartiere dolcemente gelato

di un sole mattutino ridestato dal fondo
dei più antichi giorni che dorarono il mondo.

Come portando sole la carretta spingeva
l'erbivendolo greve sopra il fango lieve;

radendolo il garzone, con un fischio d'amore
s'alzava sui pedali, cantava: Anema e core...

Tutto Monteverde tremava di martelli
da assolati cantieri ad assolati sterri.

Ma era solo un fervore di gente umiliata:
era solo la pace che una città occupata

spande nella sua luce come un tempo pura,
rassegnata a esser vinta, a brulicare oscura.

Meridionali voci, risa di vecchia gente
hanno allora un clamore che la storia non sente:

dove guizza più vivo uno straccio, uno sguardo
lì più morta al sole la natura riarde.

Ed ecco la mia casa, nella luce marina
di Via Fonteiana in cuore alla mattina:

la mia tana, indifesa, cieca di speranza,
dove bruciare l'ultima remora che mi avanza.

Entro e mi rinchiudo, muto e spento come
un impiccato solo col suo corpo e il suo nome.

E con quanta dolcezza nella mia stanza cola
l'olio dardeggiante dello svenato sole!

Ah, lo so che le cagne, con il loro latrato,
ridestano ignare il Dio dimenticato:

sento come sono, ricordo come fui,
visto dallo sguardo improvviso di Lui.

Ma anche all'uomo più ingenuo nel petto ferito
il sangue si annera, anche all'uomo più mite

nello stupito occhio si annera il dolore.
Più fu un tempo tenero, più s'indurisce il cuore.

E conosce i geli, le indifferenze, i muti
e scorati disgusti di chi ormai si rifiuti

a vibrare ancora, e sotto essi celi
la sperduta violenza dei suoi affetti veri.

E a dare, egli innocente, ai colpevoli scandalo,
china muto lo sguardo, o ragiona tremando

— il duro disprezzo e lo spaurito riso
confondendo nel vecchio ed infantile viso —

rozzo e cavilloso, sgraziato e squisito.
E, se questo è orgoglio, per questo è punito.

Sconta in esperienze disperate ed oscure
l'inesperienza chi in essa resta impuro.

O sole che inondi d'un pasquale albore
la mia povera stanza, e mi bruci sul cuore,

nella tiepida onda con cui piovi dal cielo
fai qui dentro spirare fatto puro e leggero

l'urlo delle cagne, che strozzate e stolte
promettono disprezzo, disperazione e morte...

Ma perché costringermi, ad odiare, io
che quasi grato al mondo per il mio male, il mio

essere diverso — e per questo odiato —
pure non so che amare, fedele e accorato?

Non sono ancora vivi e presenti uomini
che sono per vent'anni vissuti di passioni

soffocate in petto perché nemiche al mondo,
brucianti perché estranee a ogni triste e giocondo

atto della nazione, a ogni pena o festa
che più è ignara, più, per l'escluso, è onesta?

Uomini vissuti per vent'anni col cuore,
così fecondo, arso da infecondo rancore?

Ecco lì, dietro il lume fragrante del sole
tra sterri e impalcature, l'oleato fulgore

d'una periferia nuda come un inferno,
un fiume di terrazze contro lo sfatto schermo

dell'agro nella cui vampa diffusa fiata
tra le gru la Permolio la vampa ranciata;

e infossa il divorato vallo la Ferro-Beton
tra frane di tuguri, qualche marcio frutteto,

e file di cantieri già vecchi nel mattino.
Quasi allegri, è vero, con il loro destino

per vie calde d'asfalto, contro baracche e prati,
garzoni, operai, serve, disoccupati

brulicano al più recente giorno del creato
che dora il quartiere dolcemente gelato

di un sole mattutino ridestato dal fondo
dei più antichi giorni che dorarono il mondo...

E, però, lo so bene! se smaniano angosciosi
i latrati in quel sole, tra i rioni festosi,

e minacciano morte, sordidamente ossessi
contro chi tradisce perché è diverso, essi,

nell'aria troppo dolce, nell'umana innocenza
non sono che i messi della mia coscienza.

CARLO CASSOLA

ROSA GAGLIARDI

I.

Quella mattina Rosa si svegliò un'ora più tardi del solito. Scese dal letto e disse le preghiere intanto che si vestiva per guadagnar tempo. Poi spalancò la finestra e per qualche istante respirò l'aria profumata della mattina.

Rosa, è tardi. Come tutte le persone che vivono sole, Rosa aveva l'abitudine di parlare a se stessa. Scesa in cucina, si lavò il viso e le braccia; si aggiustò alla meglio i capelli, e mise il caffè a scaldare.

Era da poco in giardino quando una voce chiamò dall'interno.

— Vengo — disse Rosa piano.

In cucina Emilio s'era già alleggerito del carico e si asciugava il sudore col fazzoletto.

Rosa aprì la credenza, ne trasse un fiasco e un bicchiere e versò il vino a Emilio che bevve lentamente.

— Vi devo restituire i vuoti?

— No. Li riprendo domani. Ora bisogna che arrivi in paese. Mi sono invogliato di un cane...

— Un altro? — esclamò Rosa. — Non ne avete già tre o quattro?

— Quattro, infatti.

Rosa scosse la testa. Emilio sorrise. Era uno di quegli uomini che all'imbrunire amano slegare i cani per le strade del villaggio e aizzarli l'uno contro l'altro; e che non mangiano di gusto se non hanno il cane sotto la tavola.

Uscirono in giardino. Rosa s'indirizzò verso un angolo trascurato, dove aveva steso i panni ad asciugare. Ma intanto i pulcini le si erano fatti intorno pigolando. Solo uno restava da parte, intirizzito.

— Avete provato a dargli quella roba? — domandò Emilio.

— Sì. Ma non ha servito a nulla.

Emilio sospirò.

— Quanti capponi ha intenzione di fare? — chiese poi.

— Almeno quattro — rispose Rosa.

— Vengo io a farveli capponi — disse Emilio.

Rosa lo ringraziò.

Tornarono in cucina.

— Ma non le viene mai a noia di vivere sola? — disse Emilio.

— Oh, no — rispose Rosa. — E poi non sempre sono sola. Domani, per esempio, viene la mia nipotina. Ci resterà un paio di settimane.

— Da che parte è sua nipote? — domandò Emilio.

— È la bimba della mia sorella — rispose Rosa. — Abitano a Saline — aggiunse poi.

— Senti — fece Emilio interessato.

— Ora scusate, ma ho da fare.

Anche dopo la partenza di Emilio, Rosa compicciò poco.

Il pomeriggio si mise a lavorare vicino alla finestra. Anche Emilio viveva solo. Non così solo come lei, perché lì era campagna, mentre Iano è un paesino, con la chiesa e qualche bottega. Ma per un uomo star solo è peggio assai che per una donna.

Aveva gli occhi stanchi e interruppe di lavorare. Pensava a tante persone che aveva conosciuto: ora morte o lon-

tane. No, la solitudine non era grave per lei... Ma il pensiero che il giorno dopo sarebbe venuta Anna, le fece piacere.

II

Che Rosa non avesse preso marito, era stata a suo tempo una cosa incomprensibile per i parenti e i conoscenti. Ma poi avevano finita col trovarla naturale. Ora nessuno pensava più a queste cose.

Rosa sollevò gli occhi dal lavoro per guardare Anna. La bimba era cresciuta; era cambiata.

— Vuoi merenda?

— No, zia, non ho fame.

— Più tardi però devi farla.

Anna non rispose. Stava guardando le fotografie disposte a ventaglio nella parete di fondo. Vide la fotografia di un giovane in divisa di bersagliere:

— Questo chi è?

Rosa diede un'occhiata:

— Era un amico di famiglia che morì in Libia, poverino.

Quelle non erano le sole fotografie che aveva Rosa. Altre di minor conto erano conservate in una vecchia scatola di biscotti e una fotografia di Anna col vestito della Comunione figurava al posto d'onore: infilata nella vetrina della credenza.

— Anna, merenda.

Anna si fece un po' pregare, poi acconsentì. Rosa le preparò la merenda e si rimise al suo posto di lavoro.

— Vai un po' fuori finché c'è luce — disse alla nipote.

Anna uscì e Rosa la vide correre per il viottolo che portava alla casa del contadino.

Pensò che era sempre una bimba. Però, aveva quattordici anni compiuti. Dio, come passava il tempo! Le pareva ieri, la nascita della bimba; e dell'altra, di Angela, morta di nove mesi; e del cognato, che avrebbe voluto chiamare Angela anche la seconda bimba, ma la sorella si era opposta perché, diceva, quel nome portava disgrazia. Giusto lei, Rosa,

aveva suggerito: Chiamatela Anna. Come mai le era venuto in mente il nome Anna? Forse per la sua compagna di scuola.

Anna era la più bella delle sue compagne. La più bella o, per lo meno, quella che teneva di più alla propria bellezza. E poi era finita in un paese da capre, maritata a un mezzo contadino e con una quantità di figlioli.

I primi tempi la sorella e il cognato erano veramente inconsolabili. Ma poi era nata Anna. E di Angela quasi se ne erano dimenticati. Succede sempre così. Ma lei, Rosa, che non aveva le preoccupazioni della famiglia, lei aveva tempo di pensare ad Angela e a tutti gli altri parenti e conoscenti che erano scomparsi. Anche al povero Enrico, sì... Forse la sua vita sarebbe stata tutt'altra, se Enrico fosse tornato dalla guerra. Invece aveva incontrato la morte, come tanti della sua classe, sul campo di Sciara Sciat.

III

Anna spinse l'uscio della casa dei contadini. La cucina era buia e silenziosa. Diede una voce su per le scale. Non ebbe risposta.

Certo a quell'ora Bice era nei campi. Anna andò a ricercarla. Dapprima si spinse sul campo a schiena d'asino di là dalla strada: ma non c'era nessuno. Allora prese dalla parte opposta. La discesa rapida la invitò a correre. Nel tratto in cui il sentiero s'ingolfava sinuoso tra i rovi e la boscaglia, un ramoscello le batté sulla fronte e un rovo la costrinse ad arrestarsi fulmineamente. Uscita fuori dalla strettoia, saltò giù dal muro. Si rialzò e vide, nel campicello in fondo, Bice che falciava l'erba, con gesti lenti e uguali. Rimase un pezzo a guardarla. Bice, alzando un momento gli occhi dal lavoro, la vide e la salutò.

Allora scese fino da lei.

Un pomeriggio Rosa andò con la bimba a trovare due conoscenti.

— Mi ci hai portato un'altra volta, zia? — domandò Anna.

— Può darsi.

Passarono davanti a una villetta dipinta di rosa. Da una finestra del secondo piano fece capolino il vecchio Elia, e subito si ritrasse, perché era un maniaco nemico di tutto il genere umano. Dopo un'ultima giravolta, la strada sboccò in un pianoro fittamente coltivato.

Rosa era immersa nei suoi pensieri e le dispiacque di essere arrivata. Due bimbi piccoli giocavano sull'aia. Enrichetta e la sorella erano sedute fuori dell'uscio a lavorare. Il loro quartiere era attaccato a quello dei contadini, ma si riconosceva dalla vite americana che copriva metà della facciata e dalle pentole dei geranii alle finestre. Esse erano solo pigionali. Proprietario del podere era un lontano parente di Rosa.

— Guarda, c'è anche la bimba — esclamò Enrichetta, e Anna si sentì sull'una e sull'altra guancia l'umido sgradevole del bacio.

— Chiamala bimba! Ormai è una signorina — fece la sorella baciandola alla sua volta.

— No no, è una bimba — intervenne Rosa. — È sempre una bimba, per fortuna.

— Ma passate in casa — fece Enrichetta.

— No no, stiamo fuori. Si sta così bene fuori.

— Prendile una sedia — disse Enrichetta alla sorella.

Rosa ebbe un gesto come per dispiacersi del disturbo che arrecava. Malgrado fossero in confidenza, facevano sempre complimenti.

Anna era rimasta in piedi accanto a loro. Teneva le mani nelle tasche del paltoncino e fingeva di essere molto occupata a spingere un sasso qua e là col piede.

— Ah — fece improvvisamente Enrichetta — ma bisogna dare una sedia ad Anna.

— Anna sta bene anche in piedi — disse Rosa e, vedendo che la sorella si stava scomodando di nuovo: — Vai

pure, Anna. È un'età in cui non può star ferma — aggiunse rivolta alle amiche.

Dapprima Anna si fermò vicino ai bimbi. Per un pezzo osservò i loro giochi (erano tutti e due seduti in terra): poi si rivolse al più grande: — Come ti chiami? — gli disse.

Il bimbo per tutta risposta le gettò una manciata di terra. Anna si volse dalla parte delle tre donne, ma quelle erano occupate a discorrere tra loro e non avevano visto nulla. Delusa, si allontanò, girando l'angolo della casa.

Il terreno era seminato di pagliuzze. Il carro era riparato in una specie di antro. Da una finestrella venne a più riprese il tintinnio di una cavezza, seguito dai colpi degli zoccoli. Anna ficcò gli occhi nell'ombra calda e distinse la schiena lucida del cavallo. Masticando scuoteva la testa, e fili e rimasugli tritati gli cadevano dagli angoli della bocca.

Un gatto attraversava l'aia.

— Micio — fece Anna. — Micino.

Gli si avvicinò cautamente. Quello si accorse tardi delle intenzioni di Anna, ma riuscì egualmente a sgusciar via, non senza averle lasciato un ricordo sulla mano.

— Cattivo — gli gridò dietro Anna. — Cattivo. Brutto. Brutto serpente assassino.

Rise delle proprie parole. L'anno prima s'era annoiata a morte dalla zia. Ma quest'anno era tutta un'altra cosa.

IV

Rosa aveva tirato fuori il lavoro.

— Ma che mi dici — fece Enrichetta, riprendendo il suo.

Rosa sospirò:

— Una gran disgrazia — disse. — È così... Quante si ritrovano male: o il marito o i figlioli o la salute. È difficile che in una famiglia non ci sia qualche guaio. Io per me ringrazio il Cielo...

— Oh, per questo anche noi non ci possiamo lamentare — disse Enrichetta.

— Quando una resta ragazza, sembra che le sia capitata chissà quale sciagura. Ma se si pensa a tutte le disgrazie, i dispiaceri, le preoccupazioni...

— Proprio così — rispose Enrichetta.

— Una donna sola se la cava meglio nella vita — concluse Rosa.

— Guarda noi — fece Enrichetta. — Dì te se la sorte poteva esserci più nemica. Alla morte del povero babbo siamo rimaste, si può dire, nude...

La loro era una storia di stenti e di sacrifici. Nessuno era in grado di saperlo meglio di Rosa.

— Per un uomo è diversa — disse Rosa. — Un uomo che non si fa una famiglia...

— O questi uomini che rimangono vedovi — intervenne la sorella. — C'è il Landi: di quei Landi che stanno a San Lazzero: la domenica lo vediamo passare coi bimbi: mi fa una pena...

— O a noi? Non è successo lo stesso? — disse Enrichetta.

— Ma noi eravamo più grandine quando morì la mamma — rispose la sorella.

— Io avevo sedici anni. E tu quattordici — ribatté Enrichetta.

— Insomma — disse la sorella.

Anna tornò lentamente verso di loro. Ricominciarono le storie per la sedia.

— Alla sua età sta più volentieri in piedi — disse Rosa.

E le batté sulle gambe, snelle e robuste a un tempo.

Ma le sorelle insistettero e allora Anna si sedette sullo scalino.

— Ci sto benissimo — disse seria.

— Ma sarà umido — fece Enrichetta.

Il contadino passando lì davanti con un carico sulle spalle si fermò per salutarle.

— Come sta la vostra moglie? — domandò Rosa.

— Ha sempre quei dolori — rispose il contadino.

— Sai, Rosa, dolori per tutto il corpo — aggiunse Enrichetta.

— Reumi — disse il contadino.

— Ma si alza? — domandò Rosa.

— Alzare si alza — rispose Enrichetta — però può far poco.

— Qualche lavoretto intorno a casa — disse il contadino.

— È l'umidità — spiegò Enrichetta. — Anche la nostra, ma la loro poi è proprio... Son queste case vecchie.

L'uomo si allontanò curvo sotto il carico e poco persuaso.

— Io ho una grande fiducia in Sant'Antonio — disse Enrichetta riprendendo il discorso interrotto.

Anna sbadigliò.

— Poverina, si annoia coi nostri discorsi — fece Enrichetta.

— No no — si affrettò a dire la bimba.

— Sarà fame — disse Rosa. — Ora tra un po' bisognerà andare.

Le due sorelle protestarono che era ancora troppo presto. Rosa si accomodò sulla seggiola e disse:

— Si sta proprio bene qui. Eh, io lo dico sempre che state in un bel posto.

— Ci possiamo contentare — rispose Enrichetta.

Rosa guardò al di là della strada, dove gli olivi e gli alberi da frutto fittamente piantati formavano come una parete:

— Questo bel verde...

Anche Enrichetta e la sorella avevano smesso di lavorare. Per qualche minuto rimasero tutte in silenzio.

— Che pace — disse Rosa alla fine.

V

Una mattina che Emilio secondo il solito si tratteneva a parlare del più e del meno, all'improvviso Rosa gli disse di andarsene perché aveva da fare. Emilio se n'ebbe a male e per quindici giorni non si fece più vedere. Ripensando alle parole dette, Rosa se ne meravigliava lei stessa. Forse era

stato per via della bimba, che li stava guardando. Lo sguardo della bimba l'aveva messa in imbarazzo.

Quando Emilio ricomparve, la bimba era già tornata a Saline.

— È molto che non vi si vede — disse Rosa.

— Già — rispose Emilio. — Ho avuto da fare... Me ne vado subito — aggiunse.

— Non bevete? — fece Rosa, e senza attendere la risposta, tirò fuori il fiasco e un bicchiere. — Ve ne siete avuto a male dell'altra volta — disse mentre l'uomo beveva.

Emilio finse di non capire.

— Ma che uomo siete a prendervela per una parola? — insisté Rosa.

— Sa che cosa? — esclamò Emilio tornato di buon umore. — Cominciano a parlare di noi.

Questa volta fu Rosa a fingere di non capire.

— Ho già sentito qualcosina — continuò Emilio.

Rosa disse che non poteva crederci.

— E perché no? — fece Emilio. — Che ci sarebbe di male se io e lei...

S'interruppe. Malgrado fosse un bell'uomo, non era mai stato molto a suo agio con le donne.

— Fanno tanto per parlare — disse Rosa.

— È partita la sua nipotina? — domandò Emilio.

— Partì ieri — rispose Rosa. — L'avete vista? — aggiunse poi. — È quasi una ragazza.

— Davvero.

— Il tempo passa — continuò Rosa. — Mi pare ieri quando era piccina e stava quassù a mesi. — E, dopo un mezzo sospiro: — È passato il tempo in cui la gente poteva mormorare sul mio conto. Ormai quello che è stato è stato. Sono vecchia — aggiunse sorridendo.

— Non lo dica — fece Emilio — o toccherà dirlo anche a me.

— Che c'entrate voi?

— Non siamo dello stesso millesimo?

— Ma per voi uomini è diverso — rispose Rosa. — L'uo-

mo invecchia dieci anni più tardi almeno. Lo vedo con la mia sorella e il mio cognato: lui ha tre anni di più, eppure sembra sempre un giovanotto, se lo vedeste! E lei, invece... Anche per lei è andata — aggiunse tristemente.

— La sua sorella non me la ricordo — disse Emilio. — Ma lei, Rosa, sembra ancora una ragazza. Parola d'onore — aggiunse vedendo che Rosa scuoteva la testa. — Si conserva benissimo.

— Ora scusatemi, ma ho ancora da finire le faccende — disse Rosa.

Emilio si alzò per andarsene.

— State, state pure — si affrettò a dirgli Rosa.

Salì in camera. Attraverso la finestra spalancata il sole inondava il letto disfatto. Il riquadro della finestra era intensamente pervaso di luce. Quando Rosa andò a sbattere il tappeto, si sentì investire da un'ondata di calore e di profumo. Un mormorio di piacere le uscì dalle labbra. « Che bella giornata! » mormorò. Nel giardino i meli, i peschi, i mandorli erano in fiore e i tralci delle viti erano tornati a coprirsi di foglie.

Si staccò dalla finestra e prese a spolverare. Canterellava, interrompendosi di tanto in tanto, quando le faccende assorbivano tutta la sua attenzione.

Più tardi scese in cucina, dove Emilio stava facendo dei conti su un taccuino spiegazzato. Rosa passò nel piccolo salotto adiacente e aprì la finestra. Emilio si affacciò sull'uscio:

— Qualche giorno — disse — deve venire a Iano. Appena riprendo il barroccino... È possibile che lei non sia mai stata a Iano?

— Eppure è così. Non ho mai avuto occasione di andarci, in tutti questi anni. Sono cose che capitano nella vita.

VI

Rosa aveva poca simpatia con Saline e l'estate specialmente evitava di andarci, per via del caldo soffocante. In-

vece quell'anno ci dovette capitare proprio nel colmo della canicola.

I tre quarti del paese sono costituiti dalla fila di case che guarda la ferrovia. Lo stabilimento della Salina è dall'altra parte, come pure la stazione. Sulla collinetta subito a ridosso sorgono alcune casette basse e un paio di costruzioni nuove.

Erano le due del pomeriggio. Nella strada passò con grande rumore un camion e poco dopo lentamente un barroccio, col contadino addormentato.

Le due sorelle si erano sdraiate sul letto matrimoniale, dopo essersi tolte il vestito. Ora facevano attenzione a non compiere il più piccolo movimento, ma sudavano egualmente.

— Io non so davvero come tu faccia a resistere intorno ai fornelli — disse Rosa.

— È questione d'abitudine — rispose Amelia.

— E Guglielmo? — fece Rosa. — Oh, ma già, lui è sempre in movimento.

Guglielmo era il marito di Amelia. Faceva servizio sui merci da Saline a Pisa o da Saline a Grosseto. Stava fuori anche trentasei ore di fila. Non aveva orario. Tornava a casa alle ore più impensate, magari alle tre o alle quattro di notte, e Amelia lo sentiva aprire la credenza e scaldarsi il caffè.

— Anche lui fa una vita sacrificata — disse.

— E dei suoi dolori come sta? — chiese Rosa.

Era arrivata la sera prima e non aveva ancora visto il cognato.

— Come vuoi che stia? — rispose Amelia. — Sono gl'incerti del mestiere. Ti pare una cosa logica che un uomo a trentott'anni debba essere reumatizzato come un vecchio di ottanta?

Erano tre o quattr'anni che Guglielmo aveva cominciato coi dolori a una spalla e alla schiena. Ora gli si erano acutizzati, tanto che pensava di prendere un congedo.

— Quando Anna avrà preso marito — disse Amelia — io sono dell'idea che Guglielmo deve lasciare le ferrovie. Con la

pensione e quel poco che abbiamo qui... E poi potrà fare qualche altra cosetta.

Rosa le diede ragione.

— A lungo andare — riprese Amelia — il lavoro che fa Guglielmo, di notte, con qualunque tempo...

— Si capisce. È un lavoro che logora. E poi, quando sarete rimasti voi due soli, che bisogno avete...

Ormai Anna era allevata, e Amelia e Guglielmo non avevano più preoccupazioni finanziarie. Quando la bimba era piccina, allora Amelia stava sempre con la paura che succedesse qualche disgrazia al marito, o che lo mettessero fuori, come furono lì lì per metterlo fuori al tempo del fascismo; benché ci fosse la sorella che avrebbe potuto aiutarli, all'occorrenza.

Guglielmo era di famiglia benestante, e avrebbe potuto anche studiare. Ma, figlio unico, viziato, a diciannove anni, morto improvvisamente il padre, era dovuto entrare in ferrovia. Questo poteva essere anche un'umiliazione per lui, che aveva un cugino ingegnere, ma Guglielmo era di buon carattere e non rimpiangeva che le cose fossero andate a quel modo.

Con Amelia era stato fidanzato poco più di un anno, ma avevano avuto lo stesso il tempo di lasciarsi e di far la pace una dozzina di volte almeno. Anche i primi tempi del loro matrimonio erano stati tumultuosi, perché Amelia gli faceva continue scenate di gelosia e per di più non andava d'accordo con la suocera. Ma poi s'erano calmati e, se Guglielmo non aveva motivo di lamentarsi di Amelia, Amelia dal canto suo doveva riconoscere che un marito migliore di Guglielmo non c'era sulla faccia della terra.

VII

Il caldo non spaventava i ballerini e una sera fecero una festicciola nella casa accanto. Ci andarono Amelia, Rosa e Anna, e anche Guglielmo vi fece la sua comparsa.

Volevano spingerlo a ballare, ma Guglielmo, che si era fermato sulla soglia, faceva resistenza sorridendo. Da giovane era stato un gran ballerino. Egli sembrava ancora un giovanotto, mentre Amelia era ingrassata e sfiorita.

In ultimo cedette e ballò prima con la padrona di casa, e poi con la moglie. Alla fine si sentiva stanco, ma volle egualmente invitare la cognata. Vane furono le insistenze di Rosa perché la lasciassero in pace. Dovette ballare anche lei, mentre Anna batteva le mani dalla contentezza.

Rientrarono verso la mezzanotte. Guglielmo le aveva precedute perché doveva alzarsi presto. Rosa, che aveva il sonno leggero, lo sentì infatti aprire e richiudere l'uscio di casa.

Era l'alba. La strada appariva deserta e anche la stazione non dava segno di vita. Guglielmo si tirò su il bavero, perché faceva fresco. In stazione trovò solo Diego, l'impiegato, con la sigaretta in bocca, che si stropicciava le mani.

Anche Anna dormì poco quella notte, per l'eccitazione lasciatale dalla festa (c'erano tanti pochi svaghi in quel paese).

La mattina quando si alzarono la giornata si annunciava già caldissima. Il caldo non diede loro requie in tutto il giorno. Solo nell'ora che precede la cena, poterono mettere il naso fuori. Rosa e Anna sedettero subito fuori dell'uscio di casa, mentre Amelia era in cucina. Anna scherzava col cane dei vicini. Diego, passando, si staccò dagli amici e venne a scambiar due parole con Anna.

Diego era un giovane piccolo e smilzo. Aveva una ventina d'anni. In qualità di avventizio, guadagnava duecentocinquanta lire al mese. Era stato il primo ad accorgersi che Anna non poteva più considerarsi una bambina e alla festa aveva ballato quasi sempre con lei.

— Ti sei divertita iersera? — le domandò.

— Io sì e tu?

— Anch'io — rispose Diego.

Poi disse che durante l'inverno avrebbero ballato spesso e si sarebbero divertiti anche di più.

Ma se così poté essere per Diego, non lo fu per Anna, che andando avanti e indietro col treno prese la pleurite e stette per morire.

VIII

Rosa accompagnò la nipote la prima volta che questa poté uscire. Oltrepassate le ultime case, presero un viottolo in mezzo ai campi.

— Ti senti stanca, Anna?

— No, zia, andiamo avanti ancora un po'.

Andarono avanti finché furono fuori della stretta nella quale si trova il paese e davanti a loro si aprì un vasto paesaggio pacatamente illuminato dal sole pomeridiano.

— Ora ci fermiamo — disse Rosa.

— Qui che c'è bel sole.

— No, aspetta, cerchiamo un posto più riparato.

Finalmente si sedettero.

— Che bella giornata — disse Rosa.

— Davvero.

Era qualcosa di più che una bella giornata di febbraio: si avvertivano già nell'aria mite percorsa da un venticello leggero i primi segni del cambiamento di stagione.

— Via, mettiamoci a far qualcosa — disse Rosa a se stessa.

Si accomodò meglio sull'erba e tirò fuori il lavoro. Anna si era portata dietro un libro, ma non lo aprì nemmeno. Giocherellava coi fili d'erba e, soprattutto, non era mai sazia di guardarsi intorno. Sentì rumore di sonagliere, si voltò da quella parte e, quando vide sbucare le pecore, non poté frenare un moto di gioia, come se in quell'istante si fosse prodotto un evento memorabile.

— Sei soddisfatta, eh? — fece la zia.

Anna accennò di sì, ma in cuor suo sentiva che la parola non era adeguata. Non aveva mai provato nulla di simile. In lei non c'era soltanto la contentezza per essere guarita: oh, no. C'era... la felicità. Ecco la parola.

Rientrarono in paese che era già il crepuscolo. Anna aveva in braccio un mazzo di ramoscelli verdi.

La sera si fermò in fondo alle scale per ascoltare una conversazione tra la mamma e la zia.

— Bisogna che stia molto riguardata — diceva Rosa.

— E quest'anno mandarla al mare — aggiunse Amelia

— Quest'anno forse sarà troppo presto — disse Rosa. — Ma l'anno che viene certamente. Ce l'accompagnerò io, se tu non potessi. Giusto, anche a me farebbe bene un po' di mare... E mi raccomando, Amelia, che non faccia strapazzi. Niente ballare...

— Non ci mancherebbe altro.

— Ora piano piano bisogna che si convinca che per molto tempo ancora non potrà fare quello che fanno le altre. Ma è una bimba ragionevole. Lo capirà da sé.

— Poverina, chissà come le è dispiaciuto di dover lasciare la scuola. Lo faceva tanto volentieri... E poi tutto il giorno in casa si annoierà.

Dal suo nascondiglio Anna sorrise. Non si sarebbe annoiata davvero. Non le importava né del ballo, né della scuola. Era felice lo stesso.

Finalmente Rosa tornò a casa, dopo quaranta giorni di permanenza a Saline.

IX

La mattina dopo fece la sua comparsa Emilio, avvertito chissà da chi. Rosa si era appena levata.

— È un pezzo che non ci vediamo — disse Emilio. — Come sta la sua nipotina?

— Bene, ora — rispose Rosa. — Ma abbiamo passato dei momenti molto brutti. Ora dobbiamo fare i conti — aggiunse dopo una pausa. — Dovete scusarmi, Emilio, ma sono partita così all'improvviso.

— Per carità — fece Emilio.

Passato il primo momento, si trovava a corto di argomenti.

— Ma anche voi, mi hanno detto, avete avuto una disgrazia — fece Rosa.

Quando Emilio ebbe capito, si mise a parlare diffusamente di due suoi cani, che si erano ammalati all'improvviso. Il veterinario non ci aveva capito nulla. Uno poi era morto da sé, mentre l'altro... Rosa allora disse che ci si affeziona troppo alle bestie: è meglio perciò non averne.

— Però fanno compagnia — disse Emilio. — Specialmente per una come lei, che vive sola... Ma io stesso, guardi, mi era venuta la voglia di ammazzare anche gli altri due per non aver più bestie d'intorno. Lo sa che sono stato due notti senza poter dormire?

Continuò a parlarne per un pezzo. Ma Rosa si era distratta. Stava appoggiata al tavolo, con le mani in grembo, e guardava fissa davanti a sé:

— È così la vita — sospirò.

Il pomeriggio venne a trovarla Enrichetta. Parlarono del più e del meno e a un certo punto Enrichetta disse che Emilio era passato diverse volte da lei a chieder notizie... Rosa sorrise. Era il destino di Enrichetta di essere scelta per confidente. Povera Enrichetta!

L'accompagnò per un pezzo di strada, parlando di tutte altre cose.

La vita per Rosa ricominciò come prima. Si alzava presto, e tuttavia la mattinata le passava in un lampo; il pomeriggio si metteva in salottino a lavorare.

Non pensava più a Emilio, come le era accaduto per qualche tempo. Non pensava più a quella che probabilmente era l'ultima possibilità di cambiare il corso della sua vita. Sorrideva di se stessa, pensando che aveva potuto prendere in considerazione una cosa del genere.

E poi, che avrebbe pensato di lei la gente. Che avrebbero pensato la sorella, il cognato, Anna...

Rosa riprese a lavorare. Il movimento ritmico del gomito era il ritmo stesso del tempo, che ormai per lei scorreva eguale e tranquillo.

X

Nell'estate del '31 Rosa andò un mese ai bagni, riprendendo una consuetudine interrotta tre anni prima. Più che per sé, ci andò per la bimba, a cui il dottore aveva ordinato il mare. La bimba aveva ormai sedici anni.

La spiaggia non era molto popolata, perché la stagione vera e propria cominciava dopo il quindici. Rosa e la nipote scambiavano appena qualche parola col bagnino che accorreva ad aprire l'ombrellone.

Completamente vestita di nero, con la mazza a portata di mano e un medaglione sul petto, la signora Albertario faceva sentire ogni tanto la sua voce per richiamare i nipotini. Rosa ricordava di averla vista ancora dietro il banco, tre anni prima. Dopo la morte del marito, aveva venduto la drogheria e s'era ritirata in casa della figliola.

Anna non poteva fare i bagni; non aveva nemmeno il costume. Si limitava a togliersi i sandali. Sedeva sulla poltroncina di vimini o sulla rena. La zia faceva qualche lavoretto; Anna, nulla.

Un pomeriggio aveva assistito all'arrivo di una barca da pesca. Tornando verso l'ombrellone, vide la zia che discorreva con una sconosciuta piccola e grassa. La donna si andava asciugando il sudore col fazzoletto. Con lei c'era un giovane vestito. Anna si arrestò. Rosa la scorse:

— Anna! vieni qua. Questa è la bimba della mia sorella — disse quando si fu avvicinata.

— Oh, davvero! come passa il tempo! — esclamò la donna. — Pensare che l'ho tenuta in braccio quand'era in fasce...

— Ma accomodiamoci — disse Rosa. — Voi, ragazzi, mettetevi lì sulla rena.

Anna e Umberto (così si chiamava il ragazzo) si sedettero sulla rena poco distante dall'ombrellone. Umberto era piuttosto basso, con la barba già dura, e un grande ciuffo di capelli castani.

— Fa caldo — disse.

— Questi giorni addietro faceva anche più caldo — rispose Anna. — Oggi c'è un po' di vento.

— Siamo appena arrivati e m'è già venuto a noia il mare — disse il giovane.

— Io ci sto volentieri invece — rispose Anna — benché non possa fare i bagni.

— Io li posso fare — disse il giovane — ma non mi ci diverto. Forse perché non so nuotare.

Trasse di tasca una pacchetto di sigarette e ne accese una. Aveva cominciato a fumare all'età di tredici anni: era stato il padre a passargli le prime sigarette. Erano ormai quattr'anni che fumava e un pacchetto al giorno non gli era più sufficiente.

— Io faccio sempre confusione tra Casale, Guardistallo e Montescudaio — disse Anna quando ebbe saputo che il giovane era di Casale.

— Male — fece il giovane.

Anna lo guardò interrogativamente.

— Noi di Casale ci teniamo a non esser confusi coi guardistallesi e coi montescudaini — rispose il giovane.

— Perché? — fece Anna.

— Oh, così, — rispose il giovane. — Non vorrei essere un guardistallinese o un montescudaino nemmeno se mi coprissero d'oro.

In realtà Umberto era nato a Saline, da genitori salinesi. Buttò via la cicca e si stese più comodamente. Anna con la mano spianava un piccolo tratto di rena. Poi si ricordò di un discorso che era rimasto a metà:

— A vederli di qui, qual è Casale...?

— Quello più in là è Montescudaio — rispose Umberto indicando dalla parte delle barche da pesca — nel mezzo c'è Guardistallo e Casale è l'ultimo.

— Me l'ha spiegato tante volte anche la zia, ma poi me ne dimentico sempre.

Passarono due uomini con una corba di pesce, seguiti da uno stuolo di ragazzi. Umberto richiamò l'attenzione della mamma.

— Domani — rispose la mamma. — Ormai lo prenderemo domani.

I pescatori avevano notato qualcosa e s'erano fermati.

— Vuole il pesce, signora? — chiese uno dei due.

La donna scosse la testa. I pescatori ripresero a camminare e uno gridò:

— Ma com'è bello! Vivo vivo! Ma com'è speciale!

Uno dei ragazzi imitò il grido:

— Vivo vivo! Ma com'è speciale!

Umberto si mise a ridere:

— Vivo vivo! Ma com'è speciale! — disse.

Insensibilmente il pomeriggio declinava e il grigio-azzurro del mare si faceva cupo.

— Dobbiamo andare — disse la mamma.

— Così presto? — fece Rosa.

La donna rispose che erano appena arrivati e avevano da sistemar tutto.

— Tu, se mai, puoi restare ancora un po' — disse rivolta al figliolo.

— No, vengo anch'io — rispose il giovane.

Quando se ne furono andati, Anna tornò a sedersi sulla poltroncina. Dopo un'oretta anche loro tornarono verso casa. Passata la chiesa, si aprì la vista della campagna, chiusa, in fondo, dall'altura di Casale, Guardistallo e Montescudaio. Ma Anna faceva nuovamente confusione.

Rosa sorrise:

— Non imparerai mai — disse. — Quello è Montescudaio.

Di Montescudaio si vedeva appena il campanile; Guardistallo si profilava all'orizzonte; Casale era come una cascata di case lungo il declivio. Anna tornò indietro con lo sguardo e disse:

— Mi piace, Montescudaio.

— È un paese da capre — rispose Rosa. — Tutti e tre sono paesi da capre. Hanno fatto soldi — aggiunse alludendo agli Onesti — ma anche dover vivere lassù...

La sorte dell'amica non le appariva sotto una luce invi-

diabile. Come non le era mai apparsa invidiabile la sorte di Anna, della sua antica compagna maritata a Montepescali. Una volta in treno, quando era andata a Roma per l'Anno Santo, a una stazione avevano detto: Montepescali! Affacciatasi al finestrino, aveva visto, in alto, il paese.

— Oh, bestia — disse. — Ho dimenticato di comprare lo zucchero.

— Torno indietro io, zia.

— Non importa. Ce lo faremo prestare.

XI

Gli Onesti si fecero mettere l'ombrellone tra quello della signora Albertario e quello di Rosa. Umberto non cambiò molto la sua tenuta. Venne senza giacca e senza cravatta, e si levava le calze e le scarpe, ma niente di più. Una volta fece il bagno, tenendosi bene attaccato alla fune, ma uscendo disse che aveva patito freddo e che non ne avrebbe fatti altri. Mentre si asciugava al sole, Anna considerava con curiosità lo stacco fra il bianco del busto e delle gambe, e il viso, il collo e gli avambracci abbronzati.

Gli domandò se studiava.

— Ho smesso — rispose.

Anna prudentemente non gli fece altre domande, ma lui stesso aggiunse:

— Mia madre voleva che continuassi ma io, dopo la licenza tecnica inferiore, non ne ho più voluto sapere.

— A me invece sarebbe piaciuto continuare — disse Anna. — E se non fosse stato perché mi sono ammalata... Facevo la quarta magistrale inferiore.

Il giovane tirò su col naso. Gocciolava ancora. Si mise bocconi, ma subito si rialzò, e davanti era tutto sporco di rena.

— Mi sarebbe piaciuto continuare — ripeté Anna. — Almeno andavo su e giù col treno. Passavo meglio il tempo — aggiunse poi.

Il giovane accese una sigaretta e s'immerse tutto nel fumo.

Poi disse che la famiglia da cui stava a retta gli dava poco da mangiare. Questa era stata la ragione principale per cui era venuto via. Ora lavorava col padre. Il padre prendeva in affitto le terre. Era difficile trattare coi contadini perché, disse, i contadini sono duri come le pine verdi — e rise.

Il pomeriggio andò a prendere un mazzo di carte allo châlet e fece diverse partite con Anna. Anna conosceva soltanto la briscola e la scopa. Umberto si stancò presto di quei giochi e pensò bene di insegnarle la bazzica. Anna cercava di fare del suo meglio, ma a un certo punto Umberto buttò via le carte dicendo:

— Non c'è gusto a giocare con uno che non sa.

— L'ho imparato appena ora — disse Anna per scusarsi.

— Non vuol dire averlo imparato ora. È che le donne non hanno il bernoccolo del gioco. Anche con mamma non c'è nessuna soddisfazione. Giusto la scopa e la briscola — aggiunse con disprezzo.

Intanto Rosa e la signora Onesti parlavano tra loro.

— È una buona bimba — diceva quest'ultima. — Si vede subito che è una buona bimba.

— Sì, è stata educata all'antica — rispose Rosa. — Senza idee per la testa. È una bimba quieta. Sono sicura che farà una buona riuscita.

— Mi piacerebbe una ragazza così per il mio Umberto — disse la signora Onesti. E aggiunse: — Credimi che è una preoccupazione. Si fanno tanti sacrifici per i figlioli e poi... Ne ho visti Dio sa quanti di giovani rovinati per un matrimonio riuscito male. — Inghiottì (aveva una specie di tic) e disse ancora: — Perché, per conto mio, quando un matrimonio riesce male, la colpa è sempre della donna.

Rosa le diede senz'altro ragione.

— È tanto un buon ragazzo — disse la madre. — E ha già una passione al lavoro... Mi piacerebbe che sposasse una ragazza come Anna.

— È troppo presto per pensare a queste cose — disse Rosa sorridendo.

— Oh, il tempo passa tanto rapidamente. Mi sembra ieri

che allattavo e quando mi prese la tosse canina e stava per morire.

— L'esperienza m'insegna che i progetti dei genitori sono inutili — disse Rosa. — La gioventù, ormai, fa quello che vuole. Non è più come ai nostri tempi. Intendimi bene: non che io sia per i matrimoni combinati. No no, la ruffiana è una parte che non mi è mai piaciuta. Solo che i giovani dovrebbero un po' lasciarsi guidare da chi ha esperienza della vita...

— È vero, purtroppo — disse la signora Onesti. — Credimi, Rosa, che quando ci penso...

— Ci credo — disse Rosa. — Sono pensieri grossi...

— A volte la notte mi sveglio... Filippo ci ride, ma io... — Le vennero le lacrime agli occhi. — A volte penso che potrei morire da un momento all'altro.

— Eh, ora, morire.

— Perché no, Rosa? Uno di questi malacci improvvisi... Siamo nelle mani della Provvidenza. Ma il pensiero di dover morire e lasciar quel figliolo solo...

Dovette interrompersi ancora. Tirò fuori il fazzoletto e si asciugò gli occhi scuotendo la testa.

Per un pezzo stettero senza parlare. Anche Umberto e Anna, seduti nel tratto di ghiaia vicino all'acqua, tacevano.

Era l'ora in cui i ragazzi smettono di giocare e restano tranquilli accanto ai grandi; in cui si cominciano a chiudere gli ombrelli e le donne prendono congedo, raccomandandosi di non tardare.

La signora Onesti si riscosse.

— Bisogna che vada — disse.

— Vengo anch'io — fece Rosa. — Volevo entrare un momentino in chiesa...

Chiamarono i ragazzi.

XII

Rosa e Anna non si muovevano mai dall'ombrellone. Solo una volta, per far piacere agli Onesti, andarono a far due passi in pineta. Era un pomeriggio tranquillo. Nell'interno

dello châlet solo un tavolo appariva occupato: o meglio, erano due tavoli accostati: ufficiali, signore e signori che giocavano a carte. I bambini del capitano si rincorrevano fra i tavoli. E un'unica coppia ballava al suono di un grammofono.

Un gruppetto di curiosi era fermo davanti alla porta-finestra spalancata. Anche Anna si fermò a guardar ballare. Il cavaliere era un sottotenente; la dama una ragazza alta, slanciata, coi boccoli neri. Anna la invidiava. Non aveva mai ballato in una sala, ma solo, poche volte, in famiglia. Dopo che era stata malata, non aveva più ballato.

— Io non so che gusto ci provi la gente a ballare — disse Umberto. — Per conto mio, non c'è cosa più stupida del ballo.

Intanto la mamma e Rosa li avevano raggiunti.

— È un locale elegante — disse la signora Onesti.

— Sì — rispose Rosa. — Ci vengono gli ufficiali.

Arrivarono fino in fondo al viale e per una traversa riuscirono sulla spiaggia dopo l'ultimo bagno. A un centinaio di metri un barroccio caricava la ghiaia. Aveva lasciati due solchi profondi sulla rena.

La piccola comitiva si sedette in semicerchio e Rosa riprese il discorso interrotto:

— La Comunione tutte le mattine, ma confessarsi si confessa una volta la settimana. « Che peccati ha fatto questa settimana? » le domanda il confessore. « I soliti peccati ». « E allora faccia la solita penitenza ».

La signora Onesti si mise a ridere.

— Sono esagerazioni — continuò Rosa. — La povera mamma diceva: alla Messa la domenica e le feste comandate; confessarsi e comunicarsi per Natale e per Pasqua.

— Oh, anch'io, puoi immaginare — disse la signora Onesti. — E poi, quando una ha il pensiero della famiglia... Quelle che restano ragazze, invece, è facile che si dedichino tutte alla religione.

— Non c'entra la religione. Lo fanno tanto per occuparsi di qualcosa.

Era davvero strano che lei, Rosa, non avesse preso marito. Forse per via di Enrico? Ma cosa c'era stato, in fondo,

tra lei ed Enrico? Quando Enrico le aveva parlato, l'ultima sera, non gli aveva risposto né sì né no. E che altro avrebbe potuto rispondere a un giovane che partiva per la guerra, da cui non sarebbe forse più tornato, come difatti non tornò?

Forse perché la sorella minore si era sposata tanto giovane. Vuol dire a volte quando la minore si sposa prima. Lei, Rosa, aveva avuto subito molto da fare, perché Amelia e Guglielmo i primi tempi non andavano d'accordo (erano entrambi così giovani!). Una volta Amelia era arrivata all'improvviso, e le aveva gettato le braccia al collo, e piangendo aveva detto che non voleva più tornare col marito.

Ma furono nubi passeggere, e con la nascita della bimba e la morte della suocera finì ogni cosa. A quel tempo Rosa stava mesi interi in casa della sorella. E non aveva più pensato a sé. Era come se la famiglia ce l'avesse già.

E poi... c'era qualcosa in lei che intimidiva i giovanotti. Per esempio il Mori, un impiegato della Salina; che pure era un giovanotto allegro e rumoroso: solo dopo che era partito, aveva saputo della sua intenzione di sposarla.

E Stefano. Lo aveva saputo dopo anni, quando Stefano aveva già moglie e figlioli. Stefano era stato il grande amore di Enrichetta. Povera Enrichetta! Madre Natura non l'aveva certo coperta di doni. Erano cresciuti insieme, lei, Enrichetta e Stefano.

La signora Onesti s'era interrotta, e Rosa colse a volo alcune parole di Anna a Umberto.

— Nulla — aveva risposto Anna. — Le ragazze non devono far nulla. Aspettano il marito.

XIII.

Dalla finestra del salottino si vedeva il mare tutto bianco, e si distingueva il polverio sollevato dalle lunghe folate radenti. Rosa rimase in casa, mentre Anna si avventurò al mare da sola, ma tornò presto.

Il pomeriggio anche Rosa si decise ad andar sul mare. I pochi bagnanti se ne stavano addossati alle cabine. C'era anche la signora Albertario. La furia del vento non alterava l'immobilità della sua figura.

— Quanto durerà? — chiese Rosa al bagnino.

— Almeno tutto domani. O tre o cinque o sette — rispose il bagnino.

— Che cosa? — urlò Rosa che non aveva sentito o non aveva capito.

— Non lo sapete che il libeccio dura dispari?

— Noi non le sappiamo queste cose.

— Oh, già — rispose il bagnino con disprezzo. — E allora perché... — Le ultime parole se le mangiò il vento.

Più tardi fece la sua comparsa sulla spiaggia una comitiva di ufficiali e signorine. Anna riconobbe la ragazza dai boccoli neri che aveva visto ballare allo châlet. Per cinque minuti la spiaggia fu piena delle loro corse e delle loro grida.

La mareggiata durò ancora un giorno, come aveva previsto il bagnino.

Dopo la partenza degli Onesti (che si erano trattenuti al mare soltanto otto giorni) Rosa e Anna non avevano più avuto compagnia. Solo gli ultimi giorni un ragazzo che fungeva da aiuto-bagnino prese l'abitudine di sedersi sotto l'ombrellone nei momenti in cui non aveva nulla da fare. Era un bel ragazzino, ma poco sviluppato.

— Non ti vergogni a fumare alla tua età? — gli aveva detto Rosa vedendolo tirar fuori le sigarette.

— Ho sedici anni — aveva risposto il ragazzino offeso.

Aveva infatti un mese più di Anna.

Una mattina portò Anna in barca. Era la prima volta che Anna andava in barca. Il ragazzino remava vigorosamente e ben presto si aprì ad Anna la vista della pianura.

— Che sono quelle case?

— Cecina — rispose il ragazzino, stupito della domanda.

Anna si stupì della risposta. Quella visuale per lei era nuova e non ci si raccapezzava. Inoltre in pianura le distanze

sono ingannevoli e Cecina, che dista due chilometri dal mare, le sembrava a poche centinaia di metri.

— Ne sei sicuro? — domandò.

— Come? — fece il ragazzino offeso.

Il fumo delle ciminiere accresceva la nebbiosità della mattina.

— A che servono tutte quelle ciminiere? — domandò Anna.

— Sono le ciminiere delle fornaci — rispose il ragazzino.

E aggiunse che fino a due mesi prima aveva lavorato in una fornace. Faceva anche i turni di notte.

La parola « fornace » aveva un senso vago per Anna, che tuttavia si contentò. Prese a contare le ciminiere, e in quella vide i tre paesini sull'altura. A questo proposito ebbe modo d'infliggere uno scacco al ragazzino, perché lui non sapeva quale fosse Casale, quale Guardistallo e quale Montescudaio. Il ragazzino però disse che a lui non importava niente di quei posti e che era fiero di essere di Marina.

Era molto divertente avere la spiaggia di fronte e abbracciarla tutta con un colpo d'occhio. In particolare Anna guardò il loro bagno, distinse l'ombrellone e a un certo momento notò che la zia faceva dei cenni con la mano.

— La zia fa segno di tornare a riva.

— Oh, con me è sicura — rispose il ragazzino.

Tuttavia voltò la barca e poi disse ad Anna se voleva provarsi a remare. Dopo le prime palate, che furono disastrose, Anna voleva smettere, ma il ragazzino insistette, e in ultimo ad Anna riusciva di remare passabilmente. Il ragazzino la guardava soddisfatto, non cessando però di riprenderla e di dar consigli.

Giunti a riva, fu accolto con improperi e bestemmie dal bagnino perché s'era eclissato per tanto tempo. Anna lo lasciò nelle peste, e corse dalla zia.

— Tu non hai mai remato, zia? — domandò alla fine.

— No — rispose Rosa. — Avevo più o meno la tua età quando mi portavano in barca. Ma remava il bagnino.

Quei ricordi erano come al di là di una barriera nel tem-

po. A Rosa pareva quasi che non appartenessero alla sua vita.

— Povero Sergio — fece Anna. — S'è preso una risciacquata.

— È un ragazzino servizievole — disse Rosa. — Darò una mancia anche a lui.

E gliela diede infatti, prima di partire.

— Tieni — gli disse — ma non comprarci le sigarette.

Sergio ci rimase male. Poi Anna salutandolo gli diede la mano, ed egli arrossì di contentezza.

XIV

A Saline Rosa accettò di restare fino al giorno dopo, ma non più: era un mese che mancava e aveva desiderio di tornare a casa.

— E Guglielmo? — domandò.

— È andato via stamani, ma ha detto che tornava col merci — rispose Amelia. — Sarà qui per l'ora di cena.

Rosa salì in camera a lavarsi il viso e poi tornò giù e sedette in cucina. Amelia disse ad Anna di andarle a comprare mezzo chilo di sale e un etto di acciughe; Anna fece la stordita e Amelia allora le domandò se per caso non si era dimenticato di tutto al mare.

— In cooperativa? — chiese Anna.

La madre non le rispose nemmeno e Anna uscì, mentre Rosa continuava i racconti del mare. Raccontò degli Onesti. Disse che la loro vecchia amica non era per nulla cambiata: sempre grassa e florida, come una volta. Aggiunse che avevano fatto dei discorsi su Anna e Umberto: naturalmente erano discorsi senza importanza.

— A lei non ho potuto dirlo, ma non andrebbe bene, per Anna. Sai, un mezzo contadino... Anna è un altro tipo. Per lei ci vorrà uno un po' più in su, un impiegato...

— C'è tempo per queste cose — disse Amelia.

— Si fa tanto per parlare — ribatté Rosa.

Amelia aveva sempre lo stesso carattere geloso. C'era da scommettere che avrebbe fatto chissà quali storie quando fosse venuto il momento per Anna di prender marito.

Anna non era ancora tornata che Guglielmo entrò risoluto in cucina. Evidentemente non pensava più che la cognata e la figliola dovevano essere tornate. Rosa e Amelia si misero a ridere.

— Davvero, chissà dov'ero con la testa — disse Guglielmo abbracciando la cognata. — E Anna dov'è?

— L'ho mandata un momento in cooperativa — rispose la moglie.

— Allora permesso un momento — disse Guglielmo. — Salgo un momento in camera...

Scese nello stesso istante in cui rientrava Anna. Ci furono nuovi baci e abbracci. Anna voleva molto bene al babbo, il quale aveva un po' soggezione di lei.

Poi Guglielmo si mise anch'egli a sedere ed era molto soddisfatto, perché non c'era un'altra cosa che gli facesse piacere, come conversare con la cognata. Della cognata non aveva soggezione, ma una stima come probabilmente per nessun'altra persona al mondo. Dopo cena non uscì nemmeno a prendere una boccata d'aria. Ascoltava le donne discorrere tra loro e, quando tacevano, si rivolgeva a Rosa dicendo: — E così... e così... — per riattivare la conversazione.

Ma in ultimo il sonno gli piegò la testa sul tavolo. Allora le donne si decisero a sparecchiare.

XV

Ecco Rosa di nuovo in treno per l'ultima tappa del suo viaggio. Il treno aveva già ingranato la cremagliera e andava poco più che a passo d'uomo. Rosa guardava nel riquadro del finestrino la linea delle case in cima all'altura arrossata dall'ultimo sole. Quando il treno si fosse arrampicato lassù, sa-

rebbe già stato buio. La linea delle case si dirigeva lentamente sulla sinistra del finestrino. Non ne rimaneva che un ultimo tratto: finché, a un nuovo sussulto del vetro, scomparve anche quello. E scomparve insieme quel miscuglio di pensieri dolci e tristi, ma tutti egualmente vaghi e inesprimibili, che Rosa aveva provato guardando.

Pensò alla nipote. Certamente Anna si sarebbe sposata. Si vedeva subito che non era destinata a rimaner ragazza.

Anna sarebbe stata una buona moglie e una buona madre. Anche lei, Rosa, avrebbe potuto essere una buona moglie e una buona madre. Lei non era esagerata come la sorella, ma quando pensava al giorno del matrimonio di Anna, non poteva fare a meno di sentirsi rimescolare tutta.

Amelia l'aveva già detto: il giorno del matrimonio della sua unica figliola, non sarebbe stata presente né in chiesa né al banchetto. Sarebbe rimasta chiusa in camera, a riporre la roba della sua bimba. Però... inutile nasconderselo, avrebbe fatto impressione anche a lei vedere la sua Anna partire.

Perché, se si fosse sposata e avesse avuto una figliola, non le avrebbe potuto voler più bene di quanto ne voleva ad Anna. Amelia non voleva più bene ad Anna di quanto gliene voleva lei. La sua amica Onesti non voleva più bene a Umberto di quanto lei ne volesse ad Anna. La mamma di Umberto era solo esagerata, tale e quale Amelia. Che diamine! Non bisogna fissarsi sulle disgrazie. Tutto può succedere, siamo nelle mani di Dio, ma perché pensare sempre che debba succedere il peggio? E poi lei, Rosa, era fatta così. Ne aveva viste di disgrazie nella sua vita! Ma non aveva perduto la fiducia nella Provvidenza Divina. Nemmeno per un istante s'era lasciata andare alla disperazione quando l'anno prima Anna aveva preso la pleurite e per quattro giorni e quattro notti era rimasta fuori di sentimento. Amelia sembrava impazzita, ma lei non aveva perso la testa.

Ripensò al matrimonio della sorella. Al banchetto l'avevano presa in giro perché la minore le era passata avanti. E, fa vergogna a dirlo, lei, Rosa, aveva bevuto un tantino più del necessario. Gli sposi a capotavola (lei diciott'anni e lui

ventuno) erano raggianti. Tutti parlavano, ridevano, scherzavano. Ma dopo partiti gli sposi, era accaduto qualcosa in lei... qualcosa di cui nemmeno ora sapeva rendersi conto. Forse la stessa cosa le sarebbe accaduta il giorno del matrimonio di Anna.

XVI

Anna si sposò ai primi del '35: con un impiegato, secondo i desideri di Rosa.

In quel tempo cominciarono le prime partenze per l'Africa. Un giorno, sulla strada di Volterra, Rosa incontrò Emilio, che aveva paura di dover partire.

— Ma come? Alla vostra età?

— È quello che dico anch'io — fece Emilio.

Al principio dell'estate Rosa ebbe la notizia che Anna era incinta.

Fu un'estate particolarmente calda. I contadini si lamentavano perché bruciava tutto. Da qualche tempo Emilio aveva ricominciato a venire: arrivava trafelato e si tratteneva anche un'ora o due, perché non gli dava il cuore di rimettersi in strada sotto il solleone.

Temeva sempre di dover partire, e questo giovava a renderlo più loquace. Aveva fatto la guerra in maggiorità presso un Comando d'Armata: ma quando fu del Piave, spedirono in prima linea anche loro. E in una certa occasione aveva creduto proprio che non avrebbe rivisto più il suo paese.

— Sono momenti terribili — disse alla fine.

Il pomeriggio Rosa andava a riposare. Si toglieva il vestito e si buttava sul letto. Ma non riusciva a dormire. Si alzava spossata.

La stanza più fresca della casa era sempre il salottino. — Ah! — faceva Rosa accomodandosi sulla poltroncina di vimini. Erano le quattro del pomeriggio: aveva tre ore davanti a sé.

Riandava col pensiero al passato. Una folla d'immagini si

affacciava alla sua memoria. Rosa isolava quelle più care, con la stessa cura con cui aveva scelto le fotografie disposte sulla parete.

Se qualche volta pensava all'avvenire, era solo per domandarsi: sarà un bambino o una bambina? Meglio una femminuccia. Anche Anna era del suo parere; Amelia invece no, preferiva il maschio. Ma tanto era inutile starci a pensare. Avrebbero preso quello che il buon Dio manderebbe.

(*1946*)

LUCIA DRUDI

LA MAESTRA DI PIANOFORTE

La città sbilenca si apriva spampanandosi nell'autunno. Qualcuno, che non vidi, lanciò da dietro l'angolo un calcinaccio che ruzzolò davanti a me e si sgretolò lasciando un filo di polvere biancastra sul selciato. Il vento di novembre agitava foglie secche e frange di asciugamani stesi ad asciugare in giardini spinosi. Scivolavo per strade semivuote e cintate, mi sentivo mani e piedi da marionetta, di legno leggero, camminavo cercando di non calpestare mai le sconnessure né le macchie del marciapiedi stretto. Non erano ancora le quattro e già il cielo impallidiva sopra di me.

Mi fermai all'angolo del cinematografo per comprare venti centesimi di castagne. Una ventata più forte portò via il berretto della vecchia bertuccia che covava il suo fornello fuligginoso.

Poi le strade si infittirono, le case divennero alti ventagli orlati di polvere.

Ficcai la mano nella tasca per sentire la buccia liscia e dura delle castagne arrosto, il denso caldo rassicurante che mi difendeva dal vento che mi raspava i polpacci e mi ghiacciava le dita sulla cartella.

Un uccello minuscolo spiccò il volo, da un cornicione.

Mi fermai.

Ecco il grande portone, scuro, le finestre del primo piano con le sbarre curve. La luce del pomeriggio si arrestò in una pozza chiara dietro di me, quando entrai.

Bussai delicatamente allo sgabuzzino di vetro. Una pianta di geranio secco faceva bella mostra da dietro la scritta a caratteri d'oro « Portiere », cancellata a metà. Dentro, l'uomo adunco che stava reclinato su un giornale come se dormisse, rimase immobile. C'era già la lampada, accesa, che sfavillava nella penombra.

« C'è Anna? » chiesi timidamente da dietro il vetro. Mi sentivo il collo troppo lungo e stavo tutta sghimbescia.

Il padre di Anna allungò la mano e la porta si aprì con un cigolio.

Traversai la cellula lucente senza dir nulla, senza guardarmi intorno e un attimo dopo ero finalmente da Anna.

« Sembri un ubriaco, con codesto naso rosso », disse appena mi vide.

Ero come un passeggero clandestino che ha passato il confine e non avrei potuto arrabbiarmi. Ero felice. Mi soffiai sulle dita intormentite, mi tolsi la sciarpa, il basco di lana marrone, il cappotto militaresco coi bottoni fin sotto il mento e li posai sul letto, il solo posto libero, mi parve, nella stanza fitta di seggiole, di mobili antiquati e di cianfrusaglie.

« Era meglio se te lo lasciavi, il cappotto », disse Anna. « Fra un po' avrai freddo anche te, senza termosifone ».

« Impossibile », dissi. « Scoppio dal caldo ». Ora sentivo il sangue correre come una miccia, la fronte ravvivata, il corpo liscio e vivido di un cucciolo che ha voglia di addentare. Mi sfilai dai capelli un seme piumoso giallo rimasto attaccato, piovuto da chissà dove.

« Fai presto », disse Anna acidula, « alle sette devo andare alla funzione ».

Andavo a casa sua tutti i giorni, da quando era cominciata la scuola. Il padre faceva il portiere del vecchio palazzo in rovina, più che altro per risparmiare le spese di una casa in città. Ma avevano delle vigne, e un villino al mare che d'estate affittavano andando a vivere nel seminterrato. Anna mi aveva promesso di ospitarmi, l'agosto prossimo, o comunque sognavo di andare con qualcuno in una casa vicino alla sua. Pensavo ai giuochi che avremmo potuto fare, e alle passeggiate lungo la riva, coi piedi nell'acqua. Avevano anche un calesse, che era appartenuto al nonno fattore, un bel calesse con le ruote alte e la pancia dipinta di rosso come una cocciniglia. Li avevo visti, Anna e il padre, tutti e due magri e taglienti, coi capelli irti come frustini, punzecchiare il cavallo grigio e insonnolito, per la discesa che dava fuori Porta. Quanto alla madre, stava quasi sempre in casa, e ogni tanto veniva a sorvegliarci, mentre studiavamo; intravedevo la sua ombra minuta dietro il vetro a colori, e Anna cominciava a parlare una lingua che non esisteva finché la piccola faccia a cucchiaio sempre trasecolata non si affacciava a guardare un attimo, senza il coraggio di chiedere spiegazioni, e poi scompariva.

Trascinai la sola sedia libera accanto al tavolino e mi sedetti al suo fianco.

« Ti vuoi scaldare le mani? », mi chiese indicandomi lo scaldino argentato nuovo fiammante che teneva sul grembo. Ci avvicinai due dita ma faceva troppo caldo e le ritirai subito.

« Germania omnis divisa est in partes tres », cominciò a leggere con uno strattone, come se spingesse in acqua un tronco troppo pe-

sante. « Qui è facile. Omnis Germania est divisa in tres partes. Tutta la Germania è divisa in tre parti ». Il libro era quello dove aveva studiato la sua sorella maggiore; aveva gli angoli gualciti e la costola rincollata con una striscia di cerotto rosa.

Stetti lì incantata a sentire la bassa voce fluttuante di Anna, senza afferrare il senso ma solo il suono delle parole strascicate come una melma, io ero il tronco e la voce il filo ostinato che mi trasportava, e la grande stanza con la carta di Francia alle pareti, la tenda stinta, la poltrona con la macchia scura sullo schienale, era il mare con le sue dighe, le isole infestate di strani animali e le navi che stavano affondando con tutto il carico.

« Voglio vedere come vanno i topi bianchi », disse dopo un po'.

Raccolse lo scialle a uncinetto che le era scivolato dalle ginocchia sotto la tavola, raspò col cucchiaio storto nello scaldino, si tirò su i calzettoni con l'elastico e si alzò.

« Me li ha portati mio cugino l'altro ieri », disse. Si mise in ginocchio accanto al letto e tirò fuori la scatola di cartone col coperchio bucherellato. « Vuol fare il biologo. Studia anche il cuore delle rane ».

Mi avvicinai e guardai dentro la scatola i topini bianchi con il muso rosa. Stavano distesi in un basso strato di trifoglio appassito e sbirciavano appena languidamente di sotto alle palpebre di cartavelina.

« Respirano male », notai.

Mi accovacciai anch'io accanto alla scatola e provai a prenderne uno in mano. Era tiepido e molle, mi raschiò con le zampette corte contro il palmo e lo lasciai subito andare.

« Sei sicura che non siano malati? », chiesi.

« Che ne so », disse. Rimestò il trifoglio con la punta del cucchiaio. « Mi ha regalato anche un libro sulle formiche. Rilegato. Ma non mi ha detto come dovevo fare coi topi ».

Sollevò la scatola per vedere meglio, ma c'era poca luce anche così. Provò a scuoterla, come se fosse stato uno staccio, immaginai che anche il fondo fosse bucherellato e un velo di polvere si versò impalpabilmente fra di noi. I topini rotolarono uno contro l'altro, allungando le zampe, annaspando nell'erba.

« Domani viene, comunque ». Rimise la scatola sotto il letto. « Viene apposta per le lezioni di biologia. Sta a Grosseto, di solito ».

L'avevo visto, qualche volta, il cugino. Era piccolo e goffo, coi fianchi larghi, la voce un po' sorda come se parlasse da dentro una cassa di panni vecchi. Raccontava sempre delle persone che aveva incontrato in treno o all'ospedale, di una ragazza che si era chiusa un dito in una finestra ed era morta una settimana dopo, di un vecchio che aveva cercato di suicidarsi con una pistola a tamburo sotto un albero di ciliegie selvatiche, ma il colpo era partito troppo presto e la pallottola si era andata a conficcare nel tronco rugoso, come nel centro

di un bersaglio. La morte come una briciola di pane, in un grande banchetto. Minuscola. Uguale a migliaia di altre. Allungavi la mano e non sapevi qual era la tua. Diceva proverbi e spiegava ad Anna la geometria.

« E se muoiono stanotte? », chiesi.

« Sarebbero morti lo stesso », disse Anna. « Dovevano servire per gli esperimenti. Carte stagnuole ne hai portate? ».

Ne avevo cinque, prese dai pacchetti di sigarette dello zio, ancora pieni. Le levai dal quaderno dove le avevo messe perché non si gualcissero, cinque foglietti di carta scintillanti, lisciati e ripiegati che crepitarono sotto le dita. Se fossimo riuscite a raccoglierne un chilo avremmo potuto vincere un servizio da toilette e un album di pelle per le fotografie.

« Ho trovato anche questo », dissi compiaciuta. Tirai fuori di tasca il minuscolo bamboccio di cera che avevo scovato la sera prima nel comodino di Giacinta. Aveva uno spillo che gli trapassava il petto.

« Cos'è? », disse Anna prendendolo in mano un po' scettica, torcendo la punta del naso striminzito.

« Giacinta lo teneva chiuso a chiave », cercai di spiegarle. Mi piaceva portarle tutto quel che trovavo e galleggiavo ogni volta in un vago, piacevole senso di complicità e di baratto. « Ho aspettato un momento che era in bagno e aveva lasciato il comodino aperto ». Le raccontai della notte che mi ero svegliata e avevo visto Giacinta in camicia con i bigudini in testa che rimetteva delicatamente la bambolina nella bambagia.

« A cosa credi che serva? », chiesi.

Anna provò a rimetterlo in piedi sul tavolino ma non stava in equilibrio.

« È cera, se lo scaldi si può incollarlo », suggerii.

Lo tenemmo un attimo sullo scaldino, i piedi gli diventarono molli e trasparenti e Anna lo appiccicò sul coperchio del calamaio.

« Credo di saperlo, cos'è », disse. « Andiamo a farlo vedere a Francesca ». Sgusciammo nel corridoio stretto e afferrai per un attimo l'odore di sidol e di ammoniaca, di abiti ritinti in pentole affumicate, di porte socchiuse, di giornali vecchi conservati nel buio. « Che fai? », squittì la voce della mamma dalla cucina.

« Vado a farmi spiegare una cosa da Francesca », rispose Anna.

« Porta male, dove l'avete preso? », disse Francesca quando vide il nostro trofeo. Stava sdraiata sul letto come al solito, senza scarpe e con le calze di seta arrotolate sotto il ginocchio.

« L'ha trovato nel comodino di Giacinta », disse Anna sedendosi sul letto anche lei.

« A che serve? », provai di nuovo a chiedere.

« Per far soffrire uno che ti tradisce », spiegò Francesca, in fretta,

raccattando una pantofola. Aveva i capelli rossi e ondulati, lunghi fino alle spalle, il viso grassoccio con le lentiggini e gli occhi affondati nelle guance come due chicchi di pepe in una coppa di vainiglia. Faceva l'ultimo anno delle magistrali, ma era ripetente. « A scoprirlo si prende il malocchio. Come avere una spina dentro il cuore, hai capito? ». Fece una risatina e soffiò via qualcosa di invisibile dal suo vestito di lana rosa pesca. « Il solo sistema è di regalarlo a qualcun altro ». Aveva sempre l'aria di cadere sulle cose e di rimbalzare subito via, come una palla di gomma.

« Potrei darlo alla signorina Fatini », disse Anna. Era la maestra di pianoforte che abitava al piano di sopra. Le faceva lezione gratis tutti i venerdì e Anna in cambio l'aiutava a pulire la casa una volta ogni due settimane.

« A proposito », disse Francesca, « l'ho vista stamani che faceva la bella col ragazzo del cartolaio ».

Anna non rispose. Sembrava che riflettesse.

La stanza era calda e fumosa e nella grande stufa di coccio rosso la legna sputava lacrime e bollicine di sapone. Anna si era distesa per bene lo scialle sopra le spalle, come se fosse stato un mantello, stava seduta con le gambe a ciambella, impettita, aguzza, come la regina selvatica del disegno a colori dell'enciclopedia, coi capelli duri e grigi, gli occhi di gatto, il mento a spatola. La guardavo ammirata. La immaginavo impartire ordini alle creature dolciastre degli stagni, ai cespugli alti come case, alle bianche pietre traballanti, ai rotoli di foglie secche dipanate dal vento.

« Potrei rimetterlo dove l'ho preso », dissi.

« Ormai non serve, e poi se ne sarà accorta », rispose Anna decisa.

« Belle cose ti insegnano a casa tua, finirai come Giacinta, quando sarai grande », intervenne Francesca. « Si dà un chilo di rossetto e va in campagna con un sottotenente dei bersaglieri ».

« Ora mandiamo via il malocchio », disse Anna. Mi indicò lo sgabello davanti al letto. « Mettiti in ginocchio », mi ingiunse. « E chiudi gli occhi ».

Mi misi in ginocchio, serrai gli occhi finché si riempirono di conchiglie di luce, e la proporzione fu mutata d'improvviso, la voce di Anna un po' roca sembrò altissima, alta oltre il soffitto, lanciata in uno spazio tremulo, tra liane e amache di garza, dove immaginai di cadere e di essere colpevole. « Abracadabra », tuonava, « caccia il male annidato dentro di noi. Storna la punizione dal nostro capo, falla ricadere su qualcun altro ». Sentii trascinare un esercito di sedie, bussare forte contro pareti vuote, frusciare come di gatti arrampicati sui comignoli, raschiare di zampe sulla carta vetrata. Aprii gli occhi.

« Un momento », disse Anna, « non è finito ». Fece tre volte un salto su una gamba sola e sputò tre volte nell'aria.

« Che faccia spaventata, sembri un coniglio », disse Francesca.

Non si era mossa, solo aveva in mano il frustino di carta scacciamosche. « Prendi tutto sul serio. Sei come il professore di storia dell'arte. Ci somigli, anche. Hai il naso a goccia come lui ».

Mi sentivo molle e piatta, sul punto di sciogliermi in una gora come un pezzo di burro messo a scaldare.

« È tardi », intervenne Anna decisa, come se difendesse un suo diritto. « Devo andare alla funzione ».

« Piange, quando parla di Raffaello », ci buttò alle spalle Francesca mentre ce ne andavamo.

Lasciammo la quieta, galleggiante stanza in disordine, il letto con la coperta a punto a giorno e il materasso avvallato come quello di un infermo, e uscimmo nell'irto buio di fuori, io e Anna, due lemuri opalescenti dietro la fila delle beghine, due piume volanti sul tetto del mondo. Passammo davanti a una casa tozza, tagliata per sbieco sopra a una scala. Aveva le persiane chiuse, la porta chiusa e una manina d'ottone luccicante per battente.

« È una casa da tè », mormorò Anna. Guardai, ma non vidi nulla di speciale.

« Cosa? », chiesi, anch'io sottovoce.

« Un posto dove vanno a far l'amore », disse Anna con una specie di alterigia. « Non guardarci dentro, è peccato mortale ». Ragazzi ci oltrepassarono di corsa, gridando.

« Ci potresti finire anche tu, un giorno o l'altro », insisté, e io mi guardai indietro ed ebbi paura di tutto quello che mi poteva succedere e che non conoscevo, e dissi: « Io farò il poeta, quando sarò grande ». Era un'idea che mi era venuta lì per lì, ma mi parve che potesse mettermi fuori da ogni pericolo, immaginai un fermacarte d'onice posato sul mio tavolino pieno di fogli e mi sentii nitida, trasparente ed eterna come una pietra dura. La casa scomparve nel buio e nel vento.

Il vecchio orologio con l'angelo d'oro stinto addormentato sul fianco batteva proprio le sette quando arrivammo davanti alla vizza chiesa con la facciata sdrucita che inghiottì Anna e mi lasciò sola, nella stradina piena di tane, sul selciato nerofumo, fra gli archi ricuciti, gli anelli di ferro massiccio da cui invano migliaia di cavalli avevano tentato di sciogliersi, gli arpioni confitti nella pietra. Ebbi ancora paura. Mi ficcai le mani nelle tasche e strinsi le bucce fredde delle castagne, immaginai che fossero schegge che avrei potuto lanciare negli occhi di qualunque nemico. Non mi misi a correre, per non destare l'attenzione dell'ignoto appiattato dentro i portoni, ma camminai impettita, senza guardarmi intorno, camminai come una marionetta senza fiato, finché un giovanotto e una ragazza, a braccetto, non uscirono chiacchierando da un vicolo; allora mi misi dolcemente nella loro mielata scia che mi portò sana e salva fino a casa.

Sognai ancora di peccati e di streghe, mentre sorbivo la tazza di caffellatte caldo e mi spiaccicavo in bocca le molliche di pane con i resti della marmellata di pesche, e dondolavo le gambe sotto il tavolo candido della cucina. Decisi che avrei sventato le loro trappole per tutto il resto della mia vita, non sapevo bene come, ma la mia decisione mi dava un senso di allegria insonnolita e di sfida, come stare dentro una casa di vetro in mezzo a una pioggia torrenziale. Nemmeno una goccia di umidità sarebbe filtrata nel mio ritiro.

« Liberi tutti! », gridai la mattina dopo rincorrendo Anna all'uscita di scuola e toccandola di punta con la riga da disegno.

Era venuto a prenderla il cugino. Col solito cappotto quasi nero, le scarpe alte lucidate da poco, i pantaloni a righe con la cunetta sulle ginocchia e il naso mozzo, di cane selvatico, parlava e parlava, piano, fino a sprofondare nella sua stessa voce brulicante e monotona. Anna gli aveva dato la cartella da portare e seguitava a farmi dei segni che non capivo, da dietro le sue spalle a baule.

Parlavano dei topi bianchi, che erano morti durante la notte, e il cugino spiegava qualcosa sul cuore dei topi e su quello delle rane, e di come non si può sopravvivere fuori della propria aria o della propria acqua. Li accompagnai per un pezzo, camminando nel mezzo della strada, mi ero levata il basco e lo dondolavo nella giornata pungente e cristallina, respirando forte, ridendo forte, a volte dovevo riavvicinarmi per capire quel che dicevano, mi divertivo a sentirmi come uno che c'è e che non c'è, le folate improvvise che schioccavano dagli incroci erano cavalli alati che potevo ad ogni momento inforcare per volteggiare là sopra, sopra la striscia asciutta delle case, sopra la mia strada di ogni giorno scheggiata.

« Ho sistemato tutto », disse Anna quando ci salutammo. « Allora vieni, stasera ». Mi misi a correre giù per la discesa, spronandomi con la cartella nei polpacci, in una sfrenata corsa agli ostacoli.

Mi fermai solo per comprare un giornale a colori, con la fotografia di un'attrice bionda in prima pagina.

« L'ho regalato, il malocchio », mi disse Anna appena mi vide. Una faccia rotonda e liscia come un'insalatiera mi sorrise da dietro le sue spalle. Era Lidia, la ripetente dell'ultimo banco.

« Ciao ».

« Ciao. Ci sono anch'io ».

« L'ho messo nel letto della signorina Fatini », continuò Anna, « quando sono andata su per aiutarla ». Io risi e mi toccai il calcagno sinistro per scaramanzia, e per distacco, come avevo visto fare ai contadini che venivano per la fiera del mercoledì.

Il padre e la madre di Anna erano andati dall'avvocato, e lo sgabuzzino era nostro finché non tornavano. Dovevamo solo fare la guardia a chi entrava e usciva. Anna cominciò a preparare il tè, e portò il

samovar d'argento che avevano regalato alla madre per il matrimonio e che nessuno usava mai; quando fu pronto io bevvi il liquido caldo e insapore mettendomi fra i denti un pezzetto di zucchero, come avevo letto che facevano i nobili russi prima della rivoluzione, e Lidia osservò, tra scettica e ammirata. « Lo dirò alla mia compagna di banco che legge solo romanzi per signorine », mentre Anna assentiva dal suo viso di lucertola imbalsamata e io mi sentivo spampanare d'orgoglio.

« Facciamo che c'è una tempesta », proposi eccitata dall'ammirazione e ispirata dall'acqua che continuava a bollire nel samovar. Mi improvvisai pastore sorpreso da tuoni e fulmini sulla cima di una montagna impervia, e strisciai sul pavimento di mattoni rossi, piansi e invocai e promisi sottomissione eterna, mentre Anna faceva il gregge sperduto e Lidia aveva posato subito la tazza ancora piena e ci guardava soddisfatta.

« Mi farò frate! », gridai in un ultimo singulto d'angoscia. Anna spense il samovar e tornò la calma e la luce. Il giuoco continuava. Lo scricchiolio di un mobile tarlato ci trasformò in Adamo ed Eva cacciati dal Paradiso Terrestre, e il cappotto steso per terra fu il mare che dovevamo attraversare: pallottole di carta straccia furono il pane amaro da divorare fra lacrime e inconsolabile nostalgia; accoccolate sulle sedie fummo attorniate da leoni fulvi e serpenti a sonagli; la curiosità e la catalessi del peccato altrui sfrecciavano nell'immaginazione di tre bambine decrepite, per metà al di qua e per metà al di là della vita, l'ironia favolosa mescolava verità e paura, amore e morte, luogo comune e superstizione, in una funebre, sfrenata epopea, e agitammo le armi del grande inquisitore e avemmo i piedi gelati nella neve del finto pentimento di Canossa.

Un suono iroso di campane si levò d'improvviso.

« Sono i morti », disse Anna facendosi il segno della croce.

Mi segnai anch'io.

Proprio in quel momento il vecchio Caino, dalla gamba rigida per una caduta di cinquant'anni prima, nelle vesti del postino dalle mani gessose, entrava strascicando nell'antro del nostro universo scolpito.

« Già le sei », disse Anna dondolandosi.

Io galoppavo ancora senza requie per le montagne della mia fantasia, mentre ci mettemmo tutte e tre a dividere il mucchio di buste con calligrafie diverse e i giornali sotto fascia dagli annunci segnati in rosso e blu, e la voce esile e spietata di Anna recitava notizie, vere o false, su ognuno dei destinatari. Ne prese una celeste, piatta e leggera.

« È della Fatini », annunciò. « Ma scommetto che è vuota ».

« Non è possibile », risposi, non so perché.

« Allora è uno scherzo, è troppo leggera », l'alzò contro la lampada ma non traspariva.

« Prova ad aprirla col vapore », suggerì Lidia.

« Io vado fuori », intervenne in quel momento Francesca affacciandosi e scomparendo subito dalla porta.

« Hai sentito come puzzava d'olio di ricino », disse Anna continuando ad esaminare la lettera. « Se lo mette sulle ciglia per arricciarle ».

Riaccese il samovar e scollò la busta col vapore. Dentro c'era un foglietto di carta velina, con un messaggio d'amore scritto a matita, a caratteri giganteschi. Qualcuno diceva che non poteva andare all'appuntamento fuori Porta, quella sera.

« Ci scommetto che li paga, è troppo vecchia », disse Anna.

Lidia ne fece un aereoplano e lo mise in bilico sul palmo della mano sinistra.

« Va, per la chiara immensità... », cantai forte per farle ridere.

Lo sgabuzzino di vetro e ottone sfavillava come il crogiuolo di un alchimista. Lidia soffiò sul bianco volatile in bilico.

« Attenta », disse Anna. La lettera era già finita nel samovar.

« E ora come facciamo? ».

« Le diciamo che non c'era posta ».

« Il postino se ne ricorda ».

« Ne scriviamo un'altra », suggerii.

« Cosa ci metti? ».

« Lo so io ».

Prendemmo un altro foglietto di carta e io scrissi a stampatello, sempre a caratteri cubitali: Neanche se tu fossi ricoperta di pelle di topo troveresti un gatto affamato che ti salti addosso. Firmato: L'occhio invisibile.

Anna mise la nuova lettera bene in vista contro il vetro.

Tornammo a sederci intorno al tavolo, aprimmo i libri e fingemmo di studiare. Non si dovette aspettar molto. Io tenevo in mano la matita, come la fionda di David, per far franare il gigante peccatore.

« Eccola », sibilò Anna.

Una donna alta e fantasticamente variopinta navigò verso di noi, con un sorriso un po' altezzoso e traballante. Sembrava che camminasse sui trampoli.

Chiese se c'era posta, e Lidia la guardò con occhi opachi, mentre Anna le porse la busta senza sorridere. Il vecchio pennone coi colori di un'isola dei tropici si allontanò tranquilla e assorta.

La vecchia era ancora sulla porta, coi lunghi guanti rosa fragola infilati a metà, il viso carnoso col tirabaci, il busto rigido e il cappotto verde abbottonato stretto, come un soldato del re. Pensai alle sere d'estate, al mare, quando facevo i fantocci con la sabbia indurita, tra le palafitte incrostate sotto le cabine, li portavo a casa avvolti in un fazzoletto, e dopo qualche giorno si sfarinavano di colpo, tolti dal loro umido letto di cartacce e messi al sole, sul davanzale.

Dissi: « Et lux perpetua... ».

« Luceat ei », seguitò mollemente Lidia.

Rimettemmo ordine alla meglio ed uscimmo. Tre buccie vuote, tre foglioline secche attraverso la breccia aperta nella sera. Nella bottega d'angolo la vecchia merciaia si mosse nella sua grotta di nastri e pettini con gli strass, filoforti pieni di polvere, fiori di organza. Ciabattò fin sotto la lampada per mostrare a qualcuno che ci voltava le spalle una pezza di trina ingiallita. Più in là un cane randagio prese a seguirci, guardandoci con occhi cisposi e stringendo delicatamente fra i denti un involto che non era nostro, ma andavamo in silenzio e nessuna di noi gli disse « passa via », o fece un gesto per allontanarlo. Le stradine strette cadevano una nell'altra, paggi antichi di gesso e di porporina guardavano a luce spenta da dietro le finestre con le grate, mi raggiungeva a tratti un odore di incenso freddo, di dita tuffate appena nell'acquasantiera, di grandi muffe sulle pareti. Non sapevo dove eravamo dirette. Era Anna che ci faceva da guida. Apparve la piazza, come il fondo di un bicchiere di pietra. Dalla torre alta si sfrondarono gli ultimi uccelli, sopravvissuti al novembre.

« Io mi fermo qui », disse Anna d'improvviso.

Guardai. Accanto alla fontana, con una mano sul mascherone di pietra verdastra che versava acqua, c'era il cugino che l'aspettava. Anna si staccò da noi, lo raggiunse e si allontanarono insieme a braccetto.

La piazza girava ripida e nera intorno a se stessa. Rividi il Palio dell'anno prima, la terra sorda e gialla, le ali di sorbetto delle girandole, le bandiere che scavalcavano l'aria: i piatti musi ansiosi dei cavalli sbatacchiarono di nuovo per me dietro la staccionata invisibile, il mortaretto soffiò la bolla di fumo, rividi il morello che sbandava contro i materassi della curva, i suoi occhi smarriti, i suoi denti puntuti, le sue zampe alte come candelabri tutte sudate. La sera fiottava intorno a me.

« Beh, vado anch'io », disse Lidia melensa. « Speriamo che domani non m'interroghi, quella strega ».

« Io mi faccio fare una giustificazione », dissi, ancora spavalda.

« Addio, allora ».

« Addio ».

Ero rimasta sola, e sentii che la sera mi soffiava via.

CESARE VIVALDI

FIUMARA

(A Diego Carpitella)

I casotti da pesca che punteggiano
la banchina deserta lungo il fiume
sporco, la nera barca che remeggia
entro il bitume

del mare, giù alla foce, la bilancia
che sull'ultimo scoglio di cemento
un uomo leva e abbassa, finché aggancia
per caso, a stento

qualche torpida anguilla: tutto questo
in orbita più vasta accoglie e specchia,
Diego, la tua insoddisfazione, il mesto
volto che invecchia

un sorriso che è un po' di noia e insieme
di speranza, ma pure è vivo. Un'ora
triste non spegne il fuoco per cui si è
giovani ancora,

anche se ci sussurri della morte
tutto in questo paesaggio, e anche se tutto
dica che tutto sembra vano. Corte
dighe, sul flutto

scagliate, son trincee forse, difesa
al mare non opposta già ma all'onda
del tedio e del disgusto, e questa accesa
nube profonda

entro il cielo serale sventolando,
dice che tutto al mondo può rifarsi,
e gli uomini e le cose. Camminando
noi lungo gli arsi

cespi, arricchiti da un lieve sorriso,
crescere ci sentiamo, diventare
grandi. La vita è un ponte, e non un'isola:
possiamo andare

procedendo tranquilli a questa foce
di mestizia, finché splende il gabbiano
d'oro all'ultimo sole, ed una voce
canta lontano.

PRIMAVERA

Quando veloci scorrono le nubi
sulle case volando, e raggelarsi
vedi quei bei colori, quasi cubi
fossero, sparsi

da un ragazzo svogliato che con essi
compose sillabe e parole, o dadi
dal bossolo caduti appena: gessi
freddi, ove radi

spazi s'aprano all'uomo — già abolita
in forma metafisica, quadrato,

sfera, cilindro, pare sia la vita,
e quanto ho amato

e goduto e sofferto, in un istante,
da che il sole sparì di marzo, lucido
ma fuggitivo, dilegui, distante
già come luci

tremule in una nebbia che la sera
susciti lungo il fiume. E me ne vado
col cuore stretto per le vie, che annera
veloce un rado

piovasco, e penso che non sia l'amore
cosa per me, se tanto amaro è misto
a così poco dolce, se dolore
un atto visto

con occhi troppo a me stesso crudeli
o una parola mal compresa, danno
così tremendo, insoffribile. Gelidi
mi si disfanno

nella mente i pensieri, e sento vivere
me stesso come l'ombra del me stesso
che fino a pochi istanti addietro scrivere
col chiaro gesso

amava dei pensieri, sull'ardesia
dell'anima: «Viva la vita». Quasi
non fossi più io giovane, con tesi
sensi alle fasi

chiare e buie del vivere, e incapace
fossi di dare e avere. Per stridenti
note risuona a dileggiarmi e tace
di impertinenti

motoscooters un rombo, ed un'armonica
tra-la la-la nell'aria ancora fresca
da una finestra di bettola, ironica
sghignazza, arresta

i miei passi già volti, sotto magre
piante, per un viale che al sobborgo
estremo porta, ove su spiazzi d'agre
erbacce, sorgono

grattacieli isolati fra sconvolti
sterri, baracche di bandone, monti
di rifiuti e immondizie. Capovolti
nell'acqua i ponti

tremano dell'Aniene, e proseguire
è inutile. Non c'è più la città
ma solo campi, ed altri campi. Spire
di fumo s'alzano

dagli sterpi bruciati, e, appena in vista,
i candelotti che sull'aeroporto
segnano il lancio al paracadutista
nel cielo smorto.

Ora, seduto all'osteria, bevendo
vino rosso che anch'esso sa d'un fumo
leggero, mi ritrovo sorridendo
vivo. Nel bruno

bicchiere capovolte vedo strade
di nuovo rischiarate, e osservo il cielo,
e gli alberi, e le case illuminate
ora da un velo

di sole, fino a che si sovrappone
il tuo riso a ogni immagine, si perde

tremolando stupito nell'alone
del vino; e il verde

tram che giù dall'incrocio sferragliando
avanza e allarma i miei distratti sensi
e come un cane sgomenta, abbaiando,
il gran silenzio

grida che quel che ho faticato è mio,
anche l'amore, dolce e amaro come
tutto ciò che è difficile; ed è mio
il volto, il nome,

la presenza di te: se indietro guardo
sono uno che arrivato alfine al termine
sognato del viaggio, un calmo sguardo
sulle vie fermi

percorse, e non v'è nulla più di triste
in quello che è passato (o forse il fremito
appena del passare), e non ha sviste
la sorte, o premio...

Com'è difficile vivere, e come
la via che abbiamo scelta si dimostra
ogni giorno più dura! La passione
non dà alla nostra

vita che un senso, conoscere; e tu
sai bene come vanamente spera
che di vivere teme, chi laggiù
guarda la sera

infiammata calare e attende in pace
che lo annulli la notte. Invece asciuga
gli occhi al bianco del giorno! nella brace
dell'alba fuga

come stormo di passeri tra i fiori
del pero vecchio dell'orto, lo sciame
dei ricordi dagli occhi, coi colori
delle lontane

ore, ma quanto impalliditi. Andiamo,
scrollateli di dosso, siamo giovani!
Tenendoci alla vita percorriamo
la strada nuova.

Breve la nostra vicenda terrena,
ma vogliamo di noi memoria resti
in purezza e vigore, nella piena
luce di questi

giorni di Primavera, in questo vento
che per via della Cisa leva un canto
dagli alberi, e sugli alberi un armento
di nubi. Pianto

per questa bella gioventù, che fugge
senza pause né addii, ma insieme gloria
per la vita che a fondo il sangue strugge
feconda; storia

di sé e di te, di questi giorni caldi
d'amore e luce, e gelidi d'affanni,
quest'ode scrisse Cesare Vivaldi
nei suoi trent'anni.

MANLIO CANCOGNI

PARLAMI, DIMMI QUALCOSA

« Parlami, dimmi qualcosa », sussurrava mia moglie mentre si era seduti in salotto, o in una camera d'albergo, o in trattoria, o al caffè. Sospiravo, agitandomi un poco sulla sedia, cercavo di pensare, poi sorridevo vagamente e non dicevo nulla. Si stava sempre insieme; anche quando ero in viaggio mi veniva dietro. Ad aspettarmi a casa si annoiava e io desideravo averla sempre con me. Dunque mi seguiva dappertutto, in treno, in aereo, in Italia o all'estero, e pur stando sempre insieme non si diceva una parola in più del necessario. « Sei pronta? ». « Sì ». « Usciamo allora ». « Dove si va? ». « Vedremo... ».

La domenica ci sorprendeva a volte in una città straniera dove non si conosceva nessuno e non si aveva nulla da fare. Andavamo a sederci in un parco a guardare la gente che passeggiava, i fiori nelle aiuole, le anatre nel laghetto, e se faceva bel tempo ci restavamo delle ore.

« Parlami... », sussurrava mia moglie, « non dici mai nulla... ». « Cosa vuoi che dica...? » rispondevo. « Così... qualcosa... ». « E perché non mi racconti qualcosa te...? ». « Ma io non ho nulla da dirti, non mi succede nulla... ». « E a me...? » facevo.

Le stringevo il gomito, oppure le infilavo una mano sotto il braccio, e si restava così ancora per un po' di tempo, mez-

z'ora, un'ora. Avremmo potuto sentire il cuore che ci batteva nel petto, caldo, quieto, regolare.

« Andiamo », dicevo alzandomi. « Dove si va? », faceva lei, tutta allegra. « Non lo so... ».

Se strada facendo mi sfuggiva una frase banale, come ad esempio, « oggi fa caldo », o, « forse pioverà », lei si voltava subito, allungando il collo, trepidante. « Allora? » chiedeva, aspettando che continuassi. « Come allora? » facevo. « Sì, che cosa? ». « Allora niente, ho finito, non volevo dire di più... ». Lei taceva, e continuando a camminare, e poi seduti, al tavolo di un caffè, o in tram, o su una panchina, non dicevamo altro, ma si stava vicini, i nostri respiri andavano d'accordo, e così passava il tempo.

Prima di fidanzarci la vedevo sempre ridere e chiacchierare, ma soprattutto ridere perché aveva una natura allegra e non pensava a niente, neppure all'amore. Guardavo il suo viso tondo, le guance colorite, gli occhi onesti e felici, avevo voglia di parlarle, dirle tutto di me, della mia vita, delle mie aspirazioni, e invece, attaccavo a discorrere con qualcuno che era lì accanto, una sorella, un cugino, una zia. Parlavo, parlavo, arte, letteratura, religione, politica, ero brillante, spiritoso, facevo ridere, e ogni tanto le davo un'occhiata per vedere che effetto le facessero le mie parole. Sembrava non si accorgesse che erano dedicate a lei; stava chiacchierando con qualcun altro, e allora mi sentivo stringere lo stomaco, in basso, per l'invidia e forse per la gelosia.

Una volta scendevamo in bicicletta da un paese fra i monti. La strada correva a svolte nel fondo della vallata, e proseguendo veloci ci lasciavamo alle spalle i paesi appoggiati alle pendici della montagna. Eravamo una compagnia numerosa, ma noi si correva avanti, e così, pedalando in fretta nei brevi tratti pianeggianti e buttandoci a capofitto nelle discese, a un tratto m'accorgo che siamo soli e che dietro non si vede più nessuno e non si sente nemmeno una voce o uno scampanellio. Lei mi corre a fianco e io voltandomi appena,

vedo il suo profilo, la fronte e il nasino regolari, la bocca ostinatamente chiusa e la fossetta del mento. Sente che ogni tanto la guardo, ma invece di voltarsi arriccia un poco il labbro superiore scoprendo i dentini e corrugando le sopracciglia. Potremmo rallentare, parlarci, e intanto pedaliamo sempre più forte, giù per le discese, senza guardare il paesaggio che ci si apre intorno, come un ventaglio. La valle si allarga, le colline si allontanano ai lati, e davanti si apre la pianura con in fondo il mare; i tratti in discesa sono finiti, e noi avanti, avanti ancora, pigiando sui pedali. Si corre fianco a fianco, non ci siamo detti una parola, le ruote girano e accompagnati dal loro fruscio arriviamo a casa.

Mi dichiarai nel corridoio di un treno, senza guardarla, mentre si stava appoggiati al vetro del finestrino sul quale colava la pioggia. Non fu una vera dichiarazione; balbettai qualche parola, cosa di preciso non ricordo, e subito tacqui. Lei non rispose, e si tirò più in là col viso; io le presi una mano.

Il fidanzamento ebbe luogo in una casa di campagna con una folla di parenti, nonni, sorelle, fratelli, zii e cugini che si congratulavano, ridenti e commossi, ci abbracciavano e si abbracciavano fra loro in una grande stanza col caminetto. Ci sedemmo su un divano circondati dagli altri, lei mi prese una mano tenendola fra le sue e siccome avevo la sigaretta mezza spenta fra le labbra, mi disse sotto voce di non fumare. Non aveva l'intenzione di proibirmi qualcosa e l'aveva detto soltanto per avere una prova del suo potere, e io, sentendo un'ondata morbida di caldo che mi saliva al collo e alla nuca, girandomi lentamente, come se in quel momento avessi perduto l'agilità della giovinezza, spensi la sigaretta su un piattino dal bordo sbocconcellato. Intanto s'era accesa una grande conversazione, i visi brillavano, giravano i bicchieri e i vassoi con i biscotti e i pasticcini, arrivò una grande torta, e noi lì in mezzo si sorrideva, tenendoci per mano.

Abitavamo in due città diverse e una volta alla settimana andavo a trovarla. Lei mi veniva incontro nell'andito, e su-

bito ci si abbracciava; poi lei mi faceva togliere il cappello, il cappotto e si andava a sederci su un divano, in salotto. Restavamo abbracciati delle ore finché nella stanza scendeva il buio. Attraverso i vetri vedevo gli alberi del giardino diventare scuri contro il cielo, poi neri, mentre il cielo impallidiva, e infine confondersi nella notte.

S'accendeva la luce, entravano i genitori, i parenti, che sedevano intorno al divano con una grande voglia di parlare. Arrivava la cameriera con il tè e l'immancabile torta; giravano i piattini, da un mobiletto usciva una bottiglia di liquore; si beveva, si fumava, e mentre lei mi teneva la testa appoggiata alla spalla, io uscivo come da un sonno; e fresco, allegro come quando si è dormito bene, senza sogni né pesantezza di stomaco, mi mettevo a parlare, libri, cinema, politica, amici, e tutti mi ascoltavano e mi facevano domande perché parlassi ancora. Provavano piacere a sentirmi, me lo dicevano i loro visi sorridenti, gli occhi che brillavano ed era come dicessero: « che uomo intelligente, e quante cose sa, e come le racconta bene. » E come mi guardava lei, come brillavano felici i suoi occhi mentre dicevo tutte quelle cose! Dopo due o tre mesi che s'era fidanzati, in mezzo a tutti quei baci e quegli abbracci a lei non avevo ancora detto che l'amavo.

Fu molto più tardi, dopo che s'era sposati già da qualche anno che lei cominciò ogni tanto a dirmi: « Parlami... dimmi qualcosa... ». L'abbracciavo come prima, la stringevo forte, baciandola...: « amore, tesoro... », sussurravo, « vita mia... », ma veri discorsi fra noi non c'erano. Non ne sentivo il bisogno e mi sarei sorpreso se m'avessero detto che marito e moglie, o due amanti, o due fidanzati hanno l'abitudine di parlare fra loro, di dirsi tutto, di spiegarsi. Se eravamo al cinema a vedere uno di quei film d'amore in cui l'uomo e la donna non fanno che parlare come se volessero risolvere chissà quali problemi, sbuffavo irritato, poi mi voltavo verso di lei di cui scorgevo il nasino e un occhio che

brillava, le stringevo il gomito. « Che sciocchezze... », borbottavo, e lei mi prendeva la mano, annuiva, e il suo occhio continuava a brillare nella penombra verso le immagini parlanti dello schermo.

A volte mi chiedeva un consiglio per l'acquisto di un mobile o di una tovaglia, o anche per quello che avrebbe fatto a cena. « Va bene », rispondevo. « Ma come va bene se non t'ho ancora spiegato...! ». Ridevo. « Su ascoltami... », riprendeva poi. Mi descriveva il mobile o la tovaglia e se aveva sotto mano una matita e un foglio di carta cercava di farmene il disegno. Guardavo, annuivo. « Sì... sì... ». Buttava via il foglio, la matita cadeva per terra. « Con te non si può far nulla », piagnucolava. « Come nulla? ». « No... nulla ». « Perché? ». « Non mi dici mai niente ».

L'abbracciavo e lei mi abbandonava la testa sul petto. Odoravo i suoi capelli, non pensavo più a nulla, sentivo soltanto il tic tac dell'orologio a pendolo e si restava così, per un po' di tempo, magari interrompendo il pranzo, con la pietanza che si freddava nei piatti. Poi ci mettevamo a mangiare, zitti zitti, ciascuno al suo posto, il petto ancora gonfio di tenerezza: le posate battevano sui piatti, il pane spezzato crocchiava, bevevo, mi passavo il tovagliolo sulla bocca...

Si voltava dalla mia parte. « Parlami... dimmi qualcosa... », facevo, prendendola in giro. Rideva, e anch'io mi sentivo il riso salire alle guance, negli occhi, fino alla radice dei capelli.

Oggi sono passati dieci anni dacché ci siamo sposati. A mezzogiorno, in tavola c'era un muggine arrosto, un grosso pesce che occupava tutto il vassoio. Mia moglie l'aveva aggiustato per bene, in modo che la coda, piegata, facesse una bella curva, e tutto intorno aveva messo gli spicchietti di limone e qualche fogliolina verde. Lei si diverte con questi lavoretti inutili e quando le chiedo perché ci perda tempo, risponde che in quel modo il piatto è più in ordine.

« Che vuol dire, più in ordine? » chiedo.

« Così... », risponde cambiando di posto alle posate e senza guardarmi.

« Ma se deve essere mangiato subito...! » insisto.

« Non importa... », dice, con una voce che si sente appena.

Si tace per qualche secondo. Poi: « Tu ti diverti sempre a fare lavori inutili », dico, e usando sbadatamente il coltello e la forchetta aggredisco il muggine, lo sventro, ne porto via un pezzo, in modo che l'insieme, il quadretto, va per aria. Mi guarda fare, non dice nulla; sgrana soltanto gli occhi e solleva le mani, tenendole piegate all'altezza delle spalle come fanno, con le zampette davanti, i cani cuccioli.

« Che hai? » dico stizzito. Lei scuote il capo e le ciocche di capelli alle tempie la fanno somigliare per davvero a un cocker che agiti gli orecchi. « Rispondi invece di fare quella faccia spaventata », dico cominciando ad arrabbiarmi. « Quando c'è qualcosa che non va, si dice! »

Non risponde e si mette quieta a mangiare aiutandosi con un pezzetto di pane. Io invece inghiotto dei gran bocconi ungendomi le labbra e il mento, insudiciandomi le dita. So che le dispiace vedermi fare così e aspetto che mi dica di pulirmi il mento. Un tempo non mancava di farlo; ma ora non dice nulla, e per non averne la tentazione non alza gli occhi dal piatto.

« Accidenti!!! ». Una lisca mi s'è piantata in una gengiva. Mi ficco le dita in bocca; lei si alza spaventata come se volesse venire a soccorrermi. « Cosa vuoi fare adesso? » grido. « Dovresti pensarci prima, e non fare questi pesciacci. Sa di fango, è pieno di lische, unge il palato, è uno schifo! ». « Ma è venerdì... » balbetta. Allora rido. « Questa è bella! Sicché tu credi a queste storie! ».

La lisca intanto è andata via; forse non c'era affatto, m'era parso soltanto. Ma è stato un pretesto per attaccare a discorrere con mia moglie; perché ho bisogno di parlarle e non aspetto che mi inviti a farlo come una volta. Anzi, da un pezzo lei ha cessato di dirmi « parlami... » e di allungare il collo, rizzando gli orecchi se io brontolo qualcosa che può sembrare l'inizio di una frase...

E' ancora giovane, e potrebbe essere una bella donna, ma sembra che non le importi di conservarsi, non cura né l'eleganza, né la persona, né la salute, e quando glielo dico fa un gesto indifferente con le spalle. « Intanto... » mormora.

« Come intanto? Cosa vuol dire? », faccio guardandola negli occhi. Lei li abbassa: « Nulla », risponde. « Sara », comincio, sforzandomi di essere calmo, paziente. « Ragioniamo un po'. Quello che fai non è giusto. La propria persona non deve esser trascurata. È tutto ciò che abbiamo, e quando è sciupata non ci resta altro... Ne convieni Sara? La donna poi non trova facilmente qualcosa con cui sostituirla... Bisogna essere ragionevoli. Tu ti lasci andare: ma a che pro'? per chi? »

Mia moglie tace e guarda altrove, fuori della finestra. « Capisco cosa pensi », continuo. « Tu dici: intanto, o prima o poi... O prima o poi...: bella morale! Questa è la morale dei vigliacchi. È questo che pensi Sara? Rispondi! ».

« O prima o poi... » a volte ci penso anch'io, e mi sento rabbrividire. Bisogna che mi distragga, che parli d'altro. Guardo mia moglie (stiamo sempre insieme, nulla è cambiato nella nostra vita) guardo il suo viso che, pallido com'è, ricorda uno di quei lumi di opaline quando sono spenti e stanno lì, inutili, piantati sul loro gambo; e ricordando che una volta era vivo e acceso, con la bocca ridente e gli occhi che brillavano, comincio ad irritarmi. « Sei stata dal dentista? » le chiedo.

È almeno un mese che le raccomando di andarci. Lei non dice mai se le fa male un dente; si comporta cioè come le nostre care mammine, le sante donne che non volevano si spendesse nemmeno una lira per loro. Poi, naturalmente, quando la bocca andava in rovina, bisognava farci lavori complicati, ponti, corone, protesi, che so io, che costavano dieci volte di più di una semplice otturazione. A questo portava lo spirito di sacrificio e di rinuncia delle nostre care mamme!

Dunque anche mia moglie non parla dei suoi denti o soltanto quando il dolore, irrefrenabile, la fa gemere. Ma anche allora non vuole andare dal dentista. « Non importa... », dice, « passerà... ». E così i denti, che un tempo aveva belli,

bianchi, regolari, e faceva piacere vederli quando rideva, ora sono grigi, rotti, cariati.

« Sara », comincio preparandomi a un lungo discorso, « bisogna parlarci seriamente. Tu credi di essere brava, buona, generosa a non curarti; invece è una forma di pigrizia e basta. Lasciarsi andare è facile, molto facile, non c'è nessun merito... Ora ti manca un molare, e hai già quattro denti guasti... ». « Tre », bisbiglia mia moglie. « Tre, quattro... fa lo stesso », replico irritato per l'interruzione. « Presto saranno cinque, sei, e intanto qualcun altro se ne sarà andato. Sarai bella a vedersi... Già adesso, quando ridi e apri la bocca ti si vede un buco accanto al canino destro...! ».

Lei chiude svelta la bocca stringendo le labbra. L'afferro e gliel'apro di forza, facendole male. « Guarda com'è bello. E quando saranno tutti in rovina?! Non ti si potrà nemmeno stare accanto! E fossero soltanto i denti! Tu lasci andare in rovina tutto! Guardati le mani...! ».

Se le nasconde sotto il golf, e io gliele cavo fuori, aprendole le dita. « E il viso! e il collo!... Ogni donna che abbia un poco di dignità si preoccupa di conservare una bella pelle. Ma tu? E perché questo?! Lo so, lo so cosa pensi. Tanto, pensi, si deve morire... prima o poi... e dopo, chi ha sofferto, chi ha saputo sacrificarsi, rinunciare, avrà la sua ricompensa... È questo che pensi vero? ».

Mia moglie non vuole più sentirmi, si tura le orecchie, poi corre via nel salottino, si rincantuccia nel divano con un lavoretto di maglia fra le mani. Si mette a sferruzzare. Io la raggiungo, le siedo accanto.

« Perché non vuoi discutere con me di queste cose? Hai paura? Tu credi per davvero al premio futuro, al Paradiso? Ma Sara, Sara, ti rendi conto che questa è la scappatoia della povera gente... Il Paradiso... Sarebbe bello, Sara, il Paradiso... Si sta sempre insieme, per tutta la vita, che dico, per l'eternità, così, seduti su un divano, uno accanto all'altro, senza parlare, e vicino ci sono tutte le persone che amiamo, il tempo è sempre bello, l'aria tiepida... siamo tutti belli, gio-

vani, buoni, felici... Sara, come non ti vergogni a credere a queste frottole...?! Su... rispondi...! ».

Lei sferruzza in fretta, in fretta, fissando il lavoro e contando le maglie, ma già s'è sbagliata due o tre volte e intanto il petto le si gonfia, ha l'affanno e vedo che inghiotte a fatica... Le tolgo il lavoro di mano e lei non resiste, si lascia andare sulla spalliera e io le prendo una mano.

« Sara... dico questo per il tuo bene... quando si è morti è finita e la felicità non torna più ». E d'un tratto mi ricordo di una volta che, prima di sposarci, eravamo andati a fare una passeggiata, in un paesino che si chiamava Volegno. Di lì scendemmo un sentiero per andare a vedere una certa fontana. Lei indossava una camicetta di seta gialla, col collettino, la sottana di un tailleur bleu scuro e le scarpette coi tacchi alti. Scendendo era preoccupata di dove mettere i piedi perché il sentiero era irregolare, pieno di sassi, e non si voltava nemmeno per darmi un'occhiata. Il sole la prendeva nel viso, lei batteva in fretta le ciglia...

« Sara », le sussurro, « ti ricordi quando scendemmo alla fontana di Volegno? Cosa credi, anche quel pomeriggio sarà con noi in Paradiso? Anche quella camicetta? E le tue ciglia che battevano? Dovrebbe essere molto grande il tuo Paradiso per contenere tutte le belle cose del mondo...! Sara, mi ascolti? ».

Ha finito di ascoltarmi, da un pezzo si è rifugiata col viso sulla mia spalla e sento le sue lacrime che mi bagnano il collo. Oh Sara, perché non torneremo più ad essere felici come una volta? E di chi è la colpa se ora ti parlo, per tormentarti, se non c'è più l'amore?

ARTURO VIVANTE

IL SERPE

La torre era a mezzo miglio dalla sorgente e due volte al giorno solevo andarvi a prendere l'acqua, su e giù per una stradicciuola infuocata poco dopo mezzogiorno così che l'acqua fosse ancora fresca per colazione. Portavo due secchi. All'andata li reggevo con una mano sola e sbattevano l'uno contro l'altro, oppure li facevo roteare mentre correvo, ma al ritorno andavo piano e mi riposavo di tanto in tanto posandoli su qualche pietra.

Conoscevo le pietre ad una ad una, alcune erano ruvide e taglienti, altre piatte e levigate, di alcune me ne servivo come di una specie di pedana per slanciarmi in avanti, ogni piccolo aiuto era gran cosa per quella strada infuocata.

Non v'era segno d'ombra tra la torre e la sorgente. Alla sorgente invece c'erano tre platani giganteschi e un rigoglio di verdura. V'era anche un'osteria con delle tavole all'aperto. L'acqua era leggera e freschissima. Formava una polla così trasparente che veniva voglia di tuffarvi la mano per accertarsi che veramente esistesse. Dopo aver riempito i secchi, vi immergevo le dita e guardavo gli anelli d'argento divenire braccialetti sui polsi. Oppure baciavo l'acqua, l'argentea superficie tratto a tratto risaliva a sommergere la fronte, poi tutto il capo su fino alla nuca, quasi mi sarei addormentato in quella freschezza. Bevevo infine a gran sorsi ed

avvertivo l'acqua scendermi dentro il petto e spegnere tutta la mia sete. Quando non potevo più trattenere il respiro, mi mettevo a ridere a guardavo le bolle d'aria salire e raggiungere il cielo.

La sorgente era ai piedi del monte mentre la torre era in riva al mare. Era l'unica acqua dolce nei dintorni. Scorrendo via formava subito una palude salmastra che aveva comunicazioni sotterranee col mare.

Uno dei luoghi dove di solito mi riposavo era una roccia larga e piatta che compariva nel mezzo della strada e che nessuno era riuscito a sterrare perché troppo grande e profonda. Si trovava circa a metà cammino tra la sorgente e la torre e qui sostavo più a lungo che altrove.

Un giorno, dopo aver ripreso il cammino, per caso mi voltai indietro e vidi un serpe strisciare dal greto verso la roccia e bere quel poco d'acqua che avevo versato nel posare e riprendere i secchi.

L'indomani, andando verso la sorgente, diedi un'occhiata sul greto per vedere se potevo scorgere il serpe, ma non lo vidi; e neanche lo vidi al ritorno, ma dopo che ebbi lasciato la roccia e dopo che un po' d'acqua si riversò come al solito dai secchi troppo pieni, il serpe apparve di nuovo. Lo guardai strisciare fino al sasso e poi bere con la forca della sua lingua anelante, indi tornare nel greto e sparire nella boscaglia.

Capii allora che per molti giorni il serpe aveva fatto così, e che ogni pomeriggio nel greto attendeva che passassi e che lo rifornissi di acqua. D'allora in poi ogni giorno si verificò questo fatto, ed in quelle giornate di afa era questo appuntamento l'unica cosa un po' fuori dell'usuale e da cui mi ripromettessi uno svago.

Venni nell'idea che dipendesse da me per la sua acqua. Così che uno strano e segreto affetto nacque tra me e il serpe ed ebbi cura di versare più acqua del solito su quella roccia.

Un giorno chiesi a mia madre quando saremmo partiti e mi sorpresi a desiderare che rispondesse: « Oh, non ancora »,

e ricordo di essere rimasto deluso e contrariato nell'apprendere che si sarebbe partiti la settimana seguente. Non pensavo ai bagni di mare, ma ebbi la sensazione di chi è costretto a mancare a un appuntamento desiderato.

Il giorno dopo le chiesi se non si poteva restare un poco più a lungo almeno fino alla fine del mese.

Era Agosto, il sole folgorava sul greto e la boscaglia era tutta secca e ingiallita, pareva che potesse incendiarsi da sé e divenire cenere e sassi, tutta la vita spegnervisi in una improvvisa, grande fiammata.

« Credevo tu volessi partire, ma resteremo ancora un poco se vuoi », mi rispose.

Ricordo di come mi rallegrai e che nella mia contentezza non pensavo che al mio silenzioso compagno.

Avevo raccontato a mia madre del serpe il primo giorno in cui l'avevo visto, ma non le avevo detto che ogni giorno aveva seguitato a dissetarsi in quel modo, l'avevo tenuto un segreto quasi mi vergognassi di questa strana amicizia sorta tra un ragazzo ed un serpe.

Ma poi un giorno le raccontai tutto e le chiesi: « Chi sa che farà quel vecchio serpe quando ce ne saremo andati? dove troverà mai da bere? ».

« Forse di notte si disseterà alla sorgente », mi disse.

« Ma di notte fa freddo e i serpi non possono uscire all'aperto ».

« Troverà, troverà qualche modo », cercò di consolarmi. « Forse andrà alla sorgente di giorno quando non c'è nessuno ».

« Ma là c'è sempre qualcuno ».

E quasi lo vedevo avvicinarsi alla sorgente e venire battuto a morte o preso a sassate ed essere miseramente schiacciato, divenire null'altro che un maleodorante rimasuglio di vita con le mosche svolazzantigli attorno, tutta la lustra bellezza della sua vita perdersi affatto, i colori svanire nella putrefazione.

Speravo che qualcosa accadesse per rimandare la nostra partenza ma non vi furono altri rinvii.

Un telegramma arrivò da mio padre dicendo che sarebbe venuto a prenderci in automobile il giorno dopo.

Quell'ultimo giorno andai alla sorgente come di consueto e dopo aver versato una quantità d'acqua più abbondante del solito sulla pietra, m'incamminai e mi voltai a guardare.

Lentamente ancora il serpe uscì fuori dalla sua tana e strisciò sulla strada e bevve alla roccia.

Stetti a lungo a guardarlo e quando ebbe finito e tornato che fu nella boscaglia, andai di nuovo alla pietra e vi versai ancora dell'acqua e me ne andai; presto o tardi, forse prima di sera, sapevo che sarebbe tornato. Ma io pensavo all'indomani, all'appuntamento che avrei inevitabilmente mancato e alla pietra che sarebbe rimasta asciutta e scottante. Di tanto in tanto mi tornava in mente quel pensiero. La calura sembrava più intensa che mai. Verso sera mio padre arrivò in automobile. Saremmo partiti il mattino dopo.

Andai a letto ma non riuscivo a dormire. Mi alzavo continuamente e mi ributtavo giù. Finalmente però dovevo essermi addormentato perché a tarda notte fui svegliato dal colpo secco di un tuono. Mi alzai di scatto, spalancai la finestra, lampeggiava e il mare si accendeva di una luce verdastra. Udii un'onda rovesciarsi con più fragore delle precedenti sugli scogli. Un soffio di vento entrò nella stanza facendo sbattere gli scuri e sventolare il lenzuolo.

I lampi si seguivano quasi di continuo, non pareva più notte, ma giorno strano e fantastico. I tuoni accompagnavano i fulmini, i fulmini i tuoni, il mare cominciava a ingrossarsi. Una raffica di pioggia scorse il tetto, cessò un momento e poi riprese a piovere ancora più forte. Sporsi un braccio fuori della finestra, lo ritirai tutto zuppo e leccai l'acqua dolce ed insipida.

Il mattino la boscaglia sembrava rinverdita, il greto era cosparso di laghetti, la pietra era sommersa, la stradicciuola per alcuni tratti era allagata e l'automobile sollevò grandi ventagli d'acqua nel passare.

IL GABBIANO

« Libero come... come... » sembrava non saper trovare la parola giusta. Tacque un istante, poi « un gabbiano », disse.

« Avevo un giovane gabbiano una volta, » continuò. « Lo trovai sulla spiaggia. Sotto un cielo grigio, un giorno burrascoso d'inverno, sulla costa del Galles. Stavo passeggiando quando vidi qualcosa di molto piccolo nella distanza che non sembrava un sasso; anche da lontano sembrava una cosa vivente. Avvicinandomi, vidi che era un piccolissimo gabbiano. Non so come vi fosse capitato, perché non vi erano scogliere da cui potesse essere precipitato, né orme intorno a lui. Era grigio come le nuvole che si muovevano sopra di noi, quelle nuvole che avevano ogni tonalità di grigio, da quasi bianco a grigio pesante, ricco, e che cambiavano costantemente, raccogliendosi e spargendosi — grandi, nebbiosi banchi che a volte come un ubere pesante quasi toccavano terra, e sottili, trasparenti veli che passavano sfiorando la spiaggia. Di tanto in tanto altri gabbiani — bianchi questi, perché i gabbiani sono grigi quando sono piccoli ma si fanno bianchi col crescere — giravano sopra di noi, le loro grida rese fievoli e vaghe dal temporale, poi, dandosi al vento, si allontanavano, le loro ali aperte come grandi vele.

La guardai un momento — quella masserella grigia — senza toccarla. Le sue penne erano poco più consistenti di soffici piume arruffate dal vento. I suoi occhi erano semichiusi, e giaceva lì, un derelitto, attendendo il suo destino con rassegnazione. La marea avanzava e certamente sarebbe annegato e sarebbe stato trovato dopo qualche giorno, una piccola massa di ossa e di penne strappate, abbandonata dalle fauci del mare e dalla marea che si abbassava. Nuovamente la marea lo avrebbe raggiunto e l'avrebbe portato con sé, ancora e ancora lo avrebbe restituito, come per dargli la sua morte e la sua sepoltura numerosissime volte.

Ma lo trovai e lo salvai dalla tempesta e dal mare.

La mia mano, quando scese per prenderlo, deve essergli

sembrata come le grinfie di un uccello da preda venuto a rapirlo, perché d'improvviso guardò in alto e si rannicchiò nella sabbia come per inserirvisi. Ma presto trovò che le mie dita non avevano la consistenza rigida, da filo elettrico, propria degli artigli, e credo che gli piacesse il caldo della mia maglia, perché vi si accostò e chiuse gli occhi. Sentii il suo cuore battere contro il mio, ma tanto, tanto più frequente del mio.

Lo tenni accanto al petto come uno strano dono e lo portai a casa, quell'uccello, regalatomi dalla spiaggia e dal temporale.

Piccolo com'era odorava distintamente di pesce, e trovai che qualsiasi cosa gli dessi da mangiare quell'odore di pesce persisteva.

Non aveva nulla di domestico, nulla di timido. Era eminentemente ribelle. Richiedeva il suo cibo con clamore, lo inghiottiva voracemente e apriva la sua gola rosa per averne dell'altro. Beccava le mie dita, solleticava con le sue unghie il palmo della mia mano, batteva le sue piccole ali in vani tentativi di fuga. Non sapeva quello che voleva. Andarsene e mangiare, dormire e volare; tutto allo stesso tempo.

Ancora mi ricordo l'odore salmastro e acre di pesce digerito che riempiva il garage e contaminava tutto, con l'efficacia di un profumo potente.

« Oh, hai toccato il gabbiano » dicevo a mia zia.

« Dio me ne guardi », mi rispondeva. « Non ho fatto altro che entrare nel garage ».

Oppure, « Che non ti venga in mente di darmi la mano », mi diceva.

Ma a volte le porgevo la mano e lei, distrattamente, me la stringeva, poi si accorgeva che ridevo e allora si precipitava in cucina a lavarsi.

L'uccello aveva una personalità. Era spassosamente forastico. Intrepido e fiero nel suo piccolo. Sebbene abitasse nel garage, si sentiva la sua presenza per tutta la casa. Era il centro della nostra conversazione. Non mostrava alcun affet-

to o amore o gratitudine, solo divorava il suo cibo e si pr parava per il volo.

Dandogli da mangiare si aveva l'impressione di carica una macchina meravigliosa che ad un certo punto avreb sorpreso tutti i presenti librandosi in cielo; oppure era co allevare un campione per una pazza corsa alle più remo delle Esperidi. Oh, no! molto più bella di qualsiasi di ques cose era la verità, era la realtà; perché lui sarebbe diventa uno di quegli alcioni che volano intorno alle navi ed ai po e scorrono le spiagge con la loro ombra, si tuffano sul cresta dell'onda e con grida più gaie del volo, 'più giocon del canto', giocano con il vento, diventano il vento stesso mille personificazioni di gioia.

Pareva crescere a vista d'occhio, con ogni giorno che pa sava diveniva più forte e più coraggioso. Presto cominci volare, imparò tutto da sé. Volava ogni giorno un poco p lontano. Solevo prenderlo e lasciarlo sul palmo della m mano. Diventò sempre più ardito. Presto volò sopra alla ri ghiera del giardino e dovetti rincorrerlo. Ogni volta che toccavo mi pareva di toccare la libertà. Era sempre nella rezione del mare che volava, come se una grande voce chiamasse verso di sé. Un giorno volò sopra ai fili del te fono, portai le mani sulle labbra in segno d'apprensione, co devo di non rivederlo mai più, invece si posò su un boschet dall'altra parte della strada maestra.

Il giorno dopo prese un volo più lungo. Si librò sem più in alto. Il vento lo portava, pareva galleggiare nell'ar Gli correvo sotto con il viso volto in su, correvo più pre che potevo guardandolo. Calò un momento, ebbi l'impress ne di un inchino di addio, poi il vento di nuovo lo solle volò più e più lontano, verso il mare, finché lo persi di vista

AGOSTINO RICHELMY

NOVELLE E SOTTOVENTO

NOZZE D'ARGENTO

Dove con sguardo d'aprile segreto
era avviata immemore? — Su l'alba
le mani aperte. Ogni fuggire lieto.

Chi, nei bagliori fra le nubi, tese
la voluttà su lei finché l'ardore
desse un sorridere ultimo al biancore
del viso e delle altere membra arrese,

guarda e non scorge, vive e non s'esalta
su lei, quantunque pallida splendesse
più che oro acceso, quantunque incedesse
sempre nel passo leggerissimo alta.

A ogni più scialba cenere sensiva
ella or va nella nebbia, mentre illese
ragazze la cancellano e ripetono.

IMITAZIONE, DA IGOR SIEVIERIANIN

« Tutto è così come una volta, amore —
soavemente ella mi disse — Tutto! »
Io disperato gli occhi le guardavo
fiso, come una volta.
E mi teneva fra sue braccia e baci
chiuso, come una volta.
Eppur qualcosa mi mancò da sempre:
tutto così, come una volta, Amore.

PUBBLICITÀ PER UN APPARTAMENTO

Qui favoloso popolo moderno
con poteri più tecnici di Mida
individuato fra le uguali stanze
affácciati regnante su la via
ai clangori che brindano fuggendo
e agl'incontri che stridono
d'altercanti esultanze.

Sei sopra il lungofiume. Vedi l'onde
tutte in petali al sole e nel vento?
là fra gli alberi senti
musichetta non tanto lontana?
Né lontano è il piacere:
passa una donna che ti svelle sùbito
dal regno, gli occhi ha lenti
e cercanti, erte labbra testimoniano
solerti l'altre membra,
per te per sè natura in culmini e alvo.

Di prospetto alla casa
prima di sera appare

leggerissimamente nebbia rosea,
appunto la collina effusa d'aria:
vi si esaltano e calmano i pensieri.
Breve salita e dietro i muri sorgono
con alpi e nubi occidue le idee grandi
le grandi anime; scadono
fra tinte infrante a un'ultima
cerimonia del cielo in drappi neri.

Lungo la notte, quando sopra il tetto
ch'è l'infimo tuo zenit
splendidamente in mezzo al buio insiste
una stella — isola? tempio?
o fastidio di spina inesistente? —
per inebriarti a volontà d'immagini
e aggettivi
su la vetta del silenzio
leggi, regnante, o scrivi.

Ma se ancor più remoto
con il tuo sangue vivi,
fa in te profonda stanza:
scuri addii d'amici, erranti
motivetti ai venti estivi
si conchiudano a tua pace,
sazia pace di caverna
da cui stalattiti instillino
in te inerzia, umile esempio
dell'eterna noncuranza.

PRIMAVERA NEL MONFERRATO

Fra le colline in un'erbosa valle
che fili elettrici esili oltrepassano

alta una bionda e bella il viso abbassa
per baciare un omin fiacco di spalle.

Sta sull'asfalto un'impensata Ford,
palchetto da cui scese; e lungo i fianchi
vallivi un lontanar d'alberi bianchi
gradua i ripiani oltre Valrana e il nord,

ma vòlto al sòle del tramonto molle
tutto è righe di vigne diligenti
il sud ferace d'Alice Belcolle
con rosee mura e vetri risplendenti.

Dice l'omin: « T'aspettavo, hai tardato... »
e invoca il fondo della bionda luce.
Dal traliccio dei rami il vento scuce
qualche petalo bianco, in fondo al prato

sul pioppo aguzzo uno stornello sfoggia
suoi lenti fischi e al cielo si protende,
e dietro il pioppo arieggiano altri poggi
a militari ottocentesche tende.

O nano felicissimo, aspettare
t'è parso assai? Fors'era meno folle
il sogno tuo desiderando il mare
sommo a Valrana e in Alice Belcolle.

Anche a uomo di tragica statura
sarebbe assai siffatta e sì magnanima
donna. E tuo corpo raggrinzito all'anima
ha pur quanto può dare la natura.

DALL'AURELIA

(A Giorgio Bassani e a Mario Soldati)

Monti dell'Uccellina inaugurati
d'improvviso allo sguardo corridore
dal mar salite in culmini ondulati
se le nubi vi adombrano il colore?

Forse così da voi la sottostante
piana invaghisce e fino al ciel si perde,
benché tre camminanti a un faticante
scopo attraversino l'ampiezza verde.

Tre che di legne i carichi s'addossano.
Uno grande, un minore, una piccina.
Vesti hanno nere due; l'ultima rossa
ch'è quanto ha di più caro, ancor bambina.

Alla donna a la madre, e alla interiore
suscitatrice e punitrice Terra
essi ne vanno curvi nell'amore
di questa vita che in eterno atterra.

Povera eterna, addio, presenza umana
più del sol mite e più del tempo giusta;
e voi le date libertà vetusta
Monti dell'Uccellina e verde piana.

SOTTOVENTO

(Per Alberto Blandi, Remo Grigliè, Gino Nebiolo, giornalisti).

Se camminiamo impavidi
se miseria ci ferma

in compagnia o quando erma
l'anima in fondo sta

lassù frondeggia pensile
la verisimiglianza
sempre in equidistanza
fra cieli e realtà.

Di rama irraggiungibile
è ombra il nostro scrivere
segno unico del vivere
che il buio sconnetterà.

ANGELO PONSI

DOMENICA

Il giovane prete stava parlando da un pezzo. I suoi scoppi di voce non facevano alcuna presa sull'uditorio che, strusciando i piedi e a colpi di tosse, cominciava a dare segni manifesti d'impazienza. Invano un'infuocata invettiva a cui seguì l'appello alla misericordia divina, si rovesciò dagli altoparlanti sul capo degli ascoltatori. La gente era seccata. Quell'imprudente innovazione, introdotta dallo zelo del giovane prete, del Vangelo commentato alla messa di mezzogiorno la quale invece, secondo la consuetudine, doveva filar via liscia e rapida, non era stata accolta con favore dai fedeli.

La bella signora in piedi presso il terzo banco non riusciva a star ferma. Il suo piccolo orologio, frequentemente consultato, marciava verso il limite che essa stessa aveva posto alla sua sopportazione. « A mezzogiorno e mezzo me ne vado », si era detta quando le lancette segnavano mezzogiorno e ventidue, lanciando mentalmente una sfida all'incauto oratore. Ancora una volta, con gesto automatico, si calzò bene i guanti, si spinse indietro l'ampio collo della pelliccia, giocherellò con la collana che, secondo l'ultima moda, le scendeva sul petto e infine guardò di nuovo l'orologio. Ebbe un momento di esitazione, poi battendo i tacchi, facendo voltare un gran numero di ammiratori maschili coi visi intontiti dagli sbadigli, traversò la folla che occupava la navata centrale della chiesa e uscì all'aperto. Proprio sulla so-

glia sentì che il prete aveva pronunciato la frase finale della sua predica e allora si chiese se non doveva tornare sui suoi passi; ma subito decise di restar ferma nella sua protesta, scese la scalinata e camminò nella sfolgorante luce del sole.

Una primavera precoce intiepidiva l'aria. Dopo pochi passi, sentì la pelliccia come un ingombro. Del resto, a parte il caldo, trovarsi lì con quella pelliccia, a piedi, non in un luogo dove si passeggia, ma in una via qualunque con negozi di bassa macelleria e piccole osterie, le pareva perfino disonorante. Se avesse avuto la macchina, ecco che avrebbe potuto compiere il breve tragitto che la divideva dalla Passeggiata seduta al volante, senza dover badare alle buche, guardata con maggior riguardo dai passanti. Pensò con risentimento al marito, per tanti versi indulgente, fin troppo arrendevole, ma della macchina geloso fino alla ferocia. Le poche volte che era riuscita a farsi affidare il volante le era sembrato di aver accanto un altro uomo, un po' selvaggio addirittura. Forse adesso che a lei avrebbe fatto tanto comodo, la macchina se ne stava inutilizzata in garage, mentre il marito, con la pelle di daino, come gli piaceva fare la domenica, ne ripassava avanti e indietro la vernice.

La signora giunse finalmente sulla Passeggiata e subito si sentì più tranquilla, e anche più giovane e più bella. Già tre o quattro signori di una certa età si erano voltati a guardarla. Il caffè dov'era diretta brulicava di voci e di colori. I tavoli all'aperto erano quasi tutti occupati malgrado che da una parte si spingessero fin sulla Passeggiata e dall'altra arrivassero ai confini della spiaggia. La signora si scelse un tavolo ben esposto al sole e guardò con attenzione verso la spiaggia. Alla fine, fra tanti, scorse il suo bambino che giuocava a rincorrersi con la donna di servizio a cui l'aveva affidato, una ragazza di diciotto anni con una rossa selva di capelli arruffati, la quale, appena vide il gesto di richiamo della signora, subito si avvicinò.

« Senti, cara », le disse la signora, « tu ora vai a casa;

on Roberto ci resto io. A l'una e un quarto precisa butti ı pasta ».

La ragazza dette assicurazioni e se ne andò.

« Però, quei capelli! » pensò la signora seguendola con ı sguardo finché non scomparve fra la folla. Poi, rigirandosi on la destra gli anelli infilati nelle dita della sinistra, si ıise a osservare il passeggio.

La primavera serviva da pretesto allo sfoggio di un'eleanza persino eccessiva. Le donne camminavano lentamente ringendosi le borse al fianco, o reggendole per la cinghia lasciandole ciondolare; si fermavano, si voltavano, salutaano con gesti artificiosi, toccandosi senza necessità i capelli, iempiendo l'aria di piccole grida, d'inaspettati scoppi di risa. li uomini, coi visi arrossati, sbarbati di fresco, ammiravano, i scambiavano occhiate, ridevano come ebeti; con inchini, assi indietro e di fianco rendevano omaggio alle belle. La ignora osservava, giudicava, criticava; partecipava con tutta anima alla domenicale parata. I suoi occhi non conoscevano pettacolo più gradito.

Ma adesso, sul viale parallelo alla Passeggiata, transita l volante di una macchina bianca una giovane donna coi apelli sciolti sulle spalle. È una ragazzetta appena sposata; ppure guida con eleganza e tutti si voltano ad ammirare. on gli occhi dell'immaginazione la signora vede il marito he strofina le nichelature della macchina e prova una sorda ibellione contro di lui. « Che stupido! » pensa e impetuosaıente accavalla le gambe. Un ginocchio, nel brusco movimeno, è rimasto scoperto; le viene spontaneo il gesto di ricorirlo, tanto più che a passettini, quasi danzando sulla punta elle scarpe sottili, s'avanzava Pilade, elegante, avvocato, amio del marito, amico di tutti, ricco, fortunato, che tiene la esta in modo speciale, chissà per quale ragione, un po' pieata da un lato.

S'avanza dunque Pilade e la mano della signora corre stintivamente all'orlo della gonna per tirarla giù, ma poi si rresta: è che la giovane signora ha bisogno di ribellarsi, i protestare, e quel ginocchio dorato dal sole che giuoca

sulla seta è il simbolo della sua rivolta. Ora Pilade le ha preso la mano, la tiene fra le sue un momento, la bacia. Tutto questo fatto con lentezza, senza fretta, da gentiluomo. Poi si lascia scivolare sulla poltroncina e, mentre le sue mani, senza parere, aggiustano i pantaloni perché non prendano brutte pieghe, sussurra:

« Posso avere l'onore di sedere al tavolo della più bella? Lo sa che lei è la più bella? ».

La signora già si sente meglio. Pilade sa fare il galante in una maniera che procura un piacere quasi esagerato. Ti fa ammutolire. La signora cerca qualcosa da dire. Risplende al sole la fuori serie che l'avvocato ha lasciato all'altezza dei giardini.

« Ma non è più la stessa », grida la signora con voce scandalizzata. « Ma lei, Pilade, ha proprio il pallino delle fuori serie », dice, poco soddisfatta dell'espressione. « Ogni mese ne cambia una. E che colorini, poi! ».

« Già », dice Pilade senza scomporsi, ammettendo con semplicità d'esser tiranneggiato da quella passione. « Ora sono in trattative per un'Alfa », e si bacia la punta delle dita. « Se la vedesse suo marito se ne innamorerebbe. Anche lui non scherza ».

A sentir menzionare il marito la signora si rabbuia e tace. Ma Pilade par che le legga nel pensiero.

« E lei, Vera », dice ora, « cosa aspetta a prendersi la patente? ».

« Ma ce l'ho », grida la signora con una voce quasi rotta dal pianto. « Ce l'ho. È tanto che l'ho presa; a guidare ho poca pratica, ma me la cavo ».

Ed ecco Pilade, con la sua aria scherzosa e galante, senza dir una parola, è saltato in piedi, fa un inchino e tutto procede d'ora in avanti come in un sogno.

« Se è così, lei non può negarmi l'onore di provare la mia macchina », dice.

La signora dà una rapida occhiata e vede che Robertino giuoca tranquillamente coi suoi piccoli amici. Rapida decide di accettare quell'invito, e, come prima in mezzo alla folla

dei fedeli, adesso si fa strada fra i tavoli di quella mondana riunione domenicale. La seguono sguardi maschili e femminili occhiate di curiosità. « Che vedano, che sparlino! » si dice la signora dirigendosi con passo deciso verso il celeste fulgore della fuori serie. Coi suoi piccoli passi Pilade la segue, le apre lo sportello, anche lui si siede, mette in moto. Un rombo, il fischio delle gomme sull'asfalto e già sono lontani, sul viale lungomare.

Appena fuori dall'abitato, Pilade, senza spengere il motore, lascia il posto alla signora che subito tocca, accarezza col piede l'acceleratore; il lungo motore chiuso nella guaina celeste rugge e tripudia, languidamente si placa, ma pare che ancora lungo tutta la macchina corra un fremito. La signora ingrana la prima, piena di apprensione si prepara a partire. Il suo timore è infondato: la macchina è docile, solo attenta ai comandi, pronta a scattare impetuosa e feroce. La signora si fa ardita, cambia velocemente. Il viale si stende sgombro e diritto a perdita d'occhio, i ben pasciuti pneumatici si bevono l'asfalto.

Pilade, adesso, col suo ginocchio preme la gamba che tiene abbassato l'acceleratore. La signora, che già si è assuefatta a un ritmo nuovo per lei, subito decide di lasciar fare come se non si fosse accorta di nulla. Ma come si fa ad ignorare la pressione di quel braccio che è scivolato giù dallo schienale e cinge arditamente la sua schiena? « Sono tutta presa dalla guida e non mi accorgo perciò di un'impudenza a cui, in altri momenti, avrei risposto con uno schiaffo »: spingendosi esageratamente in avanti a guardare la strada, cerca di suggerire al suo compagno questa interpretazione della sua passività. Ma del resto, che importa? Anzi, quella mano che adesso Pilade ha posato sulla sua per correggere un leggero spostamento sulla sinistra, vorrebbe che quella mano restasse lì a trasmettere un calore che sembra essere quello dello spensierato e felice ordigno celeste lanciato in piena corsa.

A destra, qualche smunta pinetina, poi case e ville, fossi limacciosi; a sinistra, dopo un centinaio di metri di spiaggia,

luccicante, il mare. E nell'aria qualcosa di straordinariamen nuovo, diverso e stimolante. La mano di Pilade sulla s ebbe un indugio, come un momento di perplessità, ma n si mosse.

Pilade disse: « Svolti in una di queste stradine, così p viamo la marcia indietro ». La macchina percorse lentamen un breve tratto ghiaioso, poi si fermò col muso nella re rivolto verso il mare.

« Dov'è la marcia indietro? », chiese lei, e al suono de sue parole un brivido le percorse la schiena.

« Ah, ah, non lo sa; allora adesso è in mano mia scherzò l'avvocato, ma la voce risuonò goffa e superflua. « I co, guardi », disse ancora.

Le prese una mano, gliel'appoggiò sulla leva del cam e spinse in basso; poi, come seguitando un movimento i spensabile per ingranare la marcia indietro, si chinò su lei, col braccio che le teneva dietro la schiena la spinse d cemente verso di sé, e posò le labbra sulla sua bocca. mentre lui, sbigottito, e colmo di un'ebbra riconoscenza p la benignità della sua sorte, segnava mentalmente ancora punto a favore della fuori serie, a lei non sfuggì ness particolare — né l'inaspettata compattezza delle labbra lui, né l'acuto odore di acqua di colonia che piacevolme si confuse con quello della pelle della carrozzeria, né la gosità di una scia di nuvolette che attraversava il cielo, il quieto rumore del mare — di quel momento in cui le spalancò davanti l'affascinante voragine di una sconosciu libertà.

Nel pomeriggio disse d'aver un gran mal di testa. Il m rito uscì col bambino. Lei si chiuse in camera. La sua avv tura non era durata, per via dell'ora tarda, più di un qua d'ora; ma sulla via del ritorno, Pilade, col tono impudico commosso insieme della complicità amorosa, aveva suss rato: « Domani alle due e mezzo, dietro il Kursaal ». Ora trattava di decidere se recarsi o no a quel convegno.

Si era rannicchiata sul letto e si reggeva la testa col mito appoggiato sul cuscino. La mano sinistra, inanellata

con le unghie laccate di rosso, la teneva abbandonata sui piedi stretti uno contro l'altro. Gli scuri della finestra erano accostati e nella penombra s'intravedevano i mobili che assediavano tutt'intorno il grande letto matrimoniale. Li aveva scelti e comprati lei, spendendo una forte somma. Ora le sembrava, con quell'acquisto, d'aver compiuto un'azione in qualche modo vergognosa. Il grande armadio che, con la sua mole, impediva di poter spalancare completamente la porta della stanza, le appariva volgare e un po' pauroso.

Invano cercava di concentrarsi per deliberare su quello che l'aspettava l'indomani. Provava ad immaginarsi l'incontro con l'uomo galante e profumato che la mattina l'aveva baciata, le frasi che sarebbero state dette, ma subito i suoi pensieri divagavano e si ritrovava a fantasticare su cose assolutamente estranee alla sua avventura. Le tornavano in mente certe estati che apparivano nel ricordo lontanissime, un assonnato fluire di giornate calde che non finivano mai; certe passeggiate in bicicletta in pinete odorose e crepitanti, vasti labirinti di sentieri che s'inoltravano nei recessi umidi del sottobosco, in mezzo a ronzanti nuvole d'insetti. Di fronte alla solenne monotonia di quelle stagioni dai tramonti lenti e maestosi, tutto il presente appariva ridicolo e insignificante. Anche Pilade, con la sua stagionata vivacità mondana, appariva molto ridicolo.

Fuori il sole volgeva al tramonto e nella stanza si fece più scuro. Allungò le gambe e lasciò scivolare la testa sul cuscino.

Quella noia arcana di un tempo si era mutata, a poco a poco, in un'altra noia, fatta di vuota alacrità. Se il bambino non era ammalato, le giornate trascorrevano tutte eguali, al ritmo delle occupazioni consuete: far compere, il tè con le amiche, giocare a carte; con nessun'altra responsabilità se non quella di regolare il flusso sempre più copioso dei soldi che il marito dirottava fra le pareti domestiche e che di lì, di nuovo, accortamente, andava distribuito in numerosi rivoli verso il pizzicagnolo, l'orefice, il medico, il macellaio, la pellicceria. Verso quei luoghi in cui altri mille ri-

voli di ricchezza s'incontravano e ripartivano in direzioni diverse creando un ben ordinato sistema di canali: la fitta e solida rete della rispettabilità e della noia, la prigione della maggior parte di coloro che adesso affollavano i caffè e i viali della Passeggiata da cui giungeva fin lì, alla bella signora addormentata, il domenicale brusio.

Ebbe un soprassalto, come se l'avesse colta un'improvvisa paura. Si ritrovò allo stesso punto: il giorno dopo sarebbe andata, sì o no, al convegno? Non trovava nulla nella sua vita presente e passata che si opponesse seriamente a quel richiamo. In una vaga lontananza, in una zona non più visitata di se stessa, le pareva di veder balenare le ragioni che potevano convincerla a non andare e consolarla anche di quel rifiuto. Ma non poteva, adesso, arrivare fin là.

Ad un tratto, con un brivido di repugnanza per se stessa, sentì la verità, come una folgore, traversarle la mente e si rese conto che non sarebbe andata. Seppe che non sarebbe andata non per amore del marito, o per rispetto di sé, ma perché non avrebbe mai osato rompere la trama della noia e della rispettabilità, quella garanzia che non sarebbe intervenuto nulla a turbare la rassicurante monotonia di una vita oziosa. Fu solo un istante; ma d'altra parte, visto che non sarebbe andata, non era più necessario tentare di diradare le nebbie che di nuovo s'addensavano nel suo animo.

Dal silenzio dei cortili veniva il suono di un grammofono: il lamento struggente di una tromba dentro cui si sarebbe detto soffiasse un suonatore piangente e ubriaco. Un desiderio brutale e meccanico, che le era familiare, cominciò a serpeggiarle nel corpo, a poco a poco s'impadronì di lei, le mosse sul letto le membra. Si sarebbe placato lì, con l'omertà del marito, fra le quattro pareti di quella stanza; col tempo, senza scosse e con l'approvazione generale, si sarebbe stemperato e spento nella vecchiaia.

Era quasi buio. Quel corpo caldo, inguainato nella seta, scivolò in un pesante, pomeridiano sonno domenicale.

GIAN CARLO CONTI

VILLA GLORIA

È una casa dal colore antico
rosa sbiadito dalle molte
stagioni trascorse sull'intonaco.
D'estate la nasconde a chi passa
un folto bosco di noccioli
e una mimosa che arriva sul balcone.
Dietro c'è un piccolo frutteto
con lunghe susine bucate dalle vespe
e una vite di dolce moscato.
Qui, quando il sole è più alto
e l'ora meridiana più cocente,
con un libro di versi ci si stende
a meditare con il proprio cuore.
Un tempo era lontana, come un'isola
in mezzo alla campagna. Per le feste
arrivavano in landò le più belle
le gonne vaporose nel discendere
e si sporcavano le scarpine, felici
tuttavia come andare alla ventura.
Nei giorni della caccia, all'apertura,
in cucina appoggiavano i fucili
gli amici del nonno, venuti coi carnieri
a tracolla e i cani alla catena.

Dopo una doccia gelida partivano
la mattina presto quando ancora
la nebbia s'impigliava sulle siepi.
È una casa dal nome battagliero
che ricorda la gloria dei Comuni.
Sulle vecchie cronache si legge
che non c'era neve quando i Parmigiani
usciti dalle porte massacrarono
i neri cavalieri di Germania
e portarono in Duomo le bandiere
strappate al secondo Federico
dove ora c'è l'aia ed i ragazzi
si buttano sui mucchi della pula
nelle sere che trebbiano.
Qui visse il nonno che domava i tori
e i cavalli rinchiusi nel recinto
e nei giorni famosi degli scioperi
gettò i coloni riottosi nella vasca,
quando in città sparavano dai tetti
e si levarono alte barricate
d'operai nei borghi oltre il torrente.
Qui si sposò mia zia che rimase sola
con un vecchio baule di divise
e di arredi militari a ricordarle
lo stupore straziante del distacco.
Ogni sera, appoggiata al cancello,
prima di chiudere guardava nella strada
e con gli occhi aridi di lacrime
chiedeva a Dio la forza di resistere
stringendosi al seno la bambina.
Negli anni oscuri che seguirono
passarono ancora i cavalieri
venuti di Germania e la mitraglia
degli aerei comparsi dietro i pioppi
stroncò i nuovi virgulti del giardino.
Al fuoco del camino si riuniva
la famiglia rimasta sbigottita

a tendere le mai intirizzite,
mentre fuori nel gelido chiarore
cantava l'usignolo tra i noccioli.
Poi, quando trionfò sulle rovine
la fede di un popolo sconfitto,
noi più giovani abbiamo riportato
un poco d'allegria, di faticata
speranza, abbiamo rinnovato
le musiche nel fresco della notte,
i tanghi guancia a guancia. Adesso
la nuova civiltà è ormai vicina.
Avanzano le case di città,
gli autobus, i chioschi di benzina.
I picconi hanno divelto la siepe,
in fondo ai campi s'impilano i mattoni.
Questo è l'ultimo inverno che vedremo
la neve splendere dietro le vetrate.
I nostri figli non verranno mai
per il tempo dell'uva a farsi barbe
di granturco e a correre nell'aia.
Mia zia cercherà sotto l'asfalto allora
una casa dal nome battagliero
con una vecchia lanterna sulla porta
e un cane che impazziva ogni sera
a inseguire le rondini nel cielo.

RENZO ROSSO

BREVE VIAGGIO NEL CUORE DELLA GERMANIA

In quel giorno di fine maggio del 1953, l'unico passeggero a sbarcare a Weemunde dall'apparecchio di linea proveniente da Vienna, fu il signor Albert Motka, funzionario di uno dei tanti uffici politici berlinesi del governo alleato. Non avendo egli trovato nessuno ad accog'ierlo, in ubbidienza alle istruzioni ricevute per fonogramma entrò nella palazzina dell'areoporto e poiché durante il viaggio aveva dovuto rinunciare al pasto per un noioso mal d'aria, si sedette a un tavolo della sala restaurant e ordinò la colazione. Attraverso le vetrate aperte circolava una corrente d'aria che l'ombra rendeva fresca; il signor Motka ne fu rallegrato, perché gli toglieva di dosso il caldo della pista e gli lasciava sulla pelle un sapore frizzante d'aria di montagna.

Per quanto fosse passata da poco l'una dopo mezzogiorno, non vi era alcun altro commensale nella saletta, che dal fatto di essere piccola e arredata con molta modestia, mostrava con evidenza che la sua clientela doveva essere costituita solo dai saltuari viaggiatori in transito. Da questa iniziale osservazione il signor Motka fu tratto — per un repentino ingorgarsi delle sue riflessioni — a una previsione allarmante sul cibo, e per qualche istante gli balenò l'idea di alzarsi prima che il cameriere fosse di ritorno e di cambiare ristorante, magari spingendosi fino in città. Quando poi constatò dopo alcuni minuti di non essere stato ancora servito, benché li avesse trascorsi gustando il doppio piacere di trovarsi solo e di ammirare la vista dell'altopiano della Naahr che sembrava protrarre all'infinito e senza alcuna apparente ondulazione la liscia pista d'atterraggio, si sentì assalire da una sorda irritazione. Ma l'attitudine all'introspezione era troppo sviluppata nel signor Motka, e in quel punto era troppo desta perché egli non si rendesse conto in breve che la preoccupazione del cibo, di cui mai si

prendeva cura, e la ingiustificata impazienza in realtà dissimulavano il disagio per il servizio che si accingeva a compiere, e il cui primo morso aveva provato fin da quando era disceso dall'aereo. Questa presa di coscienza dette allora alimento alla scontentezza che egli perennemente covava per le oscillazioni contraddittorie e le paure della propria indole, e, superando lo stesso oggetto di quel disagio, lo lasciò preda di una indefinita melanconia.

Quando il Motka ebbe finito di mangiare, gli si presentò un sergente della polizia militare che gli consegnò una busta a lui indirizzata e, dopo averlo accompagnato fuori della palazzina, lo fece salire sulla macchina che il comando della città gli aveva messa a disposizione.

— Sembra incredibile con i mezzi che abbiamo, ma una macchina civile come ce l'ha chiesta Berlino per il suo servizio ho dovuto sudare per trovargliela — gli disse il sergente che gliela stava dando in consegna.

— Dove deve andare? — chiese.

— A Herzberg.

— Ah, Herzberg, molto bella, molto antica, ci vanno gli appassionati d'arte. È pratico di Weemunde? — aggiunse.

— Oh non fa nulla — gli rispose il signor Motka, facendo l'atto di spostarsi verso il sedile di guida — mi dia qualche indicazione, mi arrangerò.

— No, no, non lo dica una seconda volta, l'accompagno fuori città; e molto volentieri anche. — Fece il giro del cofano, si sedette al volante e diresse la macchina, almeno così parve al Motka, dalla parte opposta di Weemunde, che si vedeva in distanza vaporante sotto il sole di quel primo pomeriggio, negli spazi liberi tra gli edifici di una vasta caserma.

— Lei è del Servizio Segreto, o mi sbaglio? — chiese il sergente.

— Qualcosa del genere.

— Allora questa fretta è segno di caccia grossa, eh? —. Il Motka non rispose, volendo mostrare di essere seccato di quelle domande. Ma il sergente non se ne dette per inteso.

— Weemunde è celebre per le sue paste di fragole e per il vino secco; è raro che chi arriva per la prima volta non faccia subito onore alle sue specialità — spiegò il sergente, e poi: — Di cosa si tratta? Non si offenda ma mi interesserebbe saperlo. Qui vi è una noia che neppure se la immagina. E in fondo una certa parentela ce l'abbiamo, no? — gli disse sorridendo.

— Nulla di speciale, una semplice indagine — gli rispose il Motka.

— Politica! Ci scommetto. Dicono che la zona sia in tensione, almeno a dar retta ai giornali. Una settimana fa abbiamo arrestato tre individui che si spacciavano per rappresentanti di commercio di Lipsia. Se li figura lei tre rappresentanti insieme? Di giorno per le campagne

vicine all'areoporto e di notte sempre alla stessa tavola, stesso albergo? Che gliene pare?

— E chi erano? — chiese il signor Motka.

— Erano rappresentanti; e proprio di Lipsia. Concimi chimici dicevano. Io non li avrei lasciati andare così presto. È facile sfoderare un alibi di quel genere, che ne dice? C'è un tale traffico di spie da queste parti e nessuno fa niente. È di questo genere il suo affare?

— No, niente spionaggio. Delitti di guerra. — Ritenne di averlo soddisfatto, ma si avvide invece di averlo deluso. Il sergente ci pensò su qualche istante, e poi disse:

— A otto anni di distanza ancora quella storia. Mi scusi sa, ma vorrei sapere se c'è qualcuno che ci guadagna sopra. È impopolarità bella e buona che si riversa addosso a noi, questo è, non se ne è accorto diamine? Sapesse come sono in fondo gelosi dei propri criminali di guerra! A cinque chilometri da qui per esempio, laggiù vede sotto quella collina là, c'era un campo per ebrei. Ne avevamo otto in carcere, dei loro guardiani: ebbene, quando li abbiamo rilasciati quattro mesi fa, sembrava che a guadagnare la libertà fossero stati tutti loro, le commesse, i giornalai, gli impiegati del comando, tutti le dico, oh non lo davano a vedere pubblicamente, ma uno che non era stupido li capiva fin troppo bene. Le donne poi le doveva vedere, ah se le doveva vedere! Queste grasse, bionde e rosee f... tedesche. Se venissero lasciati in pace una buona volta, sarebbe meno faticoso e più divertente viverci in mezzo, sì, più divertente glielo assicuro — concluse il sergente.

Dopo un lungo giro si erano riavvicinati alla città; gruppi sparsi di case e recinti di depositi fiancheggiavano la strada; numerosi autotreni erano fermi o in lenta manovra davanti ai posti di rifornimento delle varie marche di gasolio. Poi arrivarono a un incrocio, costellato di cartelli indicatori. Herzberg veniva data in due direzioni diverse. Il sergente fermò la macchina e prima di salutare il signor Motka gli consigliò quella che si partiva subito a mano destra, per lo scarso traffico e perché il fondo vi era migliore. Aggiunse che vi era qualche chilometro di più, ma che sarebbe ugualmente arrivato prima. Il Motka gli disse che contava di essere di ritorno non più tardi delle otto, per poter prendere il rapido delle otto e quarantacinque.

— Sarò all'areoporto alle otto in punto, allora; la stazione è a due passi. La strada che abbiamo fatto adesso è una specie di circonvallazione ha visto, le sarà facile ritrovarla. In bocca al lupo, per quanto...

Il signor Motka si spostò alla guida della macchina e ripartì velocemente, lieto di essersi liberato di quel chiacchierone. Percorsi un paio di chilometri dovette riconoscere però che il suggerimento che gli era stato dato non poteva essere migliore; la strada era davvero eccellente, a brevi salite succedevano lunghi e leggeri pendii, e il nastro

d'asfalto scuro, morbido e levigato sotto le ruote, si svolgeva senza interruzione in mezzo a boschi di abeti e di larici che invitavano ad assaporare la quieta frescura dei loro chiaroscuri profondi. Il Motka pensò che poteva scorgere in questo paesaggio un estremo tentativo della terra tedesca di vincere la sua interna aggrovigliata resistenza, col fornirgli verso la conclusione di quel soggiorno forzato, il quadro di un piacevole ricordo. Quel servizio era l'ultimo di una serie che lo aveva tenuto per quasi un mese al confine austriaco, e con esso terminava il suo periodo di ferma. L'indomani mattina avrebbe presentato il suo ultimo rapporto a Berlino e al più tardi entro quattro giorni sarebbe stato a casa.

Si chiese se non avrebbe dovuto infine sentirsi rinfrancato. Quei tre anni berlinesi erano stati tristi per lui e non lo aveva di certo aiutato il suo carattere a sopportarli. Era stato richiamato in qualità di esperto di questioni tedesche, ma poiché ciò non corrispondeva che in minima parte alla sua specifica preparazione che era di natura strettamente culturale, si era venuto a trovare fin da principio in una posizione che il suo duro e fragile orgoglio aveva reso ambigua e spinosa. Albert Motka non era un ambizioso, ché gli mancava la dote indispensabile a tale virtù della passione personale, e intanto che il modesto vigore del suo sangue egli lo disperdeva nel chiuso giardino delle sensazioni e delle fantasticherie sentimentali, i risultati ottenuti nello studio e in seguito nella carriera universitaria egli li doveva principalmente all'uso costante e metodico della semplice forza d'inerzia. In questi l'aveva anche aiutato il timore di deludere, che era in lui intensissimo a causa degli scrupoli che come tutti i deboli, soffriva di fronte alle regole dell'apparenza.

Per questo il Motka a Berlino non si era mai potuto liberare dal sospetto che tutti si attendessero da lui delle manifestazioni di acume politico proporzionate al suo prestigio professionale, e quantunque nella realtà non gli avessero mai affidato compiti per i quali occorresse più che una buona conoscenza della lingua tedesca, la sua diffidenza si era inasprita, e col tempo, seguendo la trama di una reazione istintiva, lo aveva gettato nel disinteresse più profondo per tutto ciò che avesse relazione con il suo ufficio. In effetti, attraverso codesto complicato gioco di motivazioni e di impulsi, questo era stato un fine della sua natura, che come lo aveva guidato nella scelta della specializzazione universitaria verso la filologia e la storia medioevale tedesca, così sempre rifuggiva dalla realtà, nella quale sentiva oscuramente solo un rischio per la sua impotenza. — Anni tristi — ripeté. Ma sussurrando tali parole, come se quell'aggettivo per il sortilegio dei suoi significati avesse respinto ogni altra realtà, si riaffacciò alla mente del Motka il pensiero dominante. Quegli anni erano stati tristi non tanto per gli equivoci e i timori del suo incarico, ma per i sentimenti e i dolori nati da un

legame con una giovane donna tedesca Anne Gruber, che per un cumulo di ingannevoli circostanze lo aveva esaltato oltre ogni dire e spinto in una mortificante situazione. Eppure nonostante tutto questo e per quanti aiuti e consolazioni egli si ripromettesse di trarre dal suo buon senso e dal suo orgoglio, non avrebbe potuto staccarsi con gioia da quel periodo che era sul punto di concludersi. La realtà era che il Motka, al pari di quei malati che in proncinto di raggiungere con l'aiuto del medico la liberazione da una loro nevrosi, inconsciamente le resistono per non precipitare nella nuova sofferenza della sua mancanza, quella spina che tanto lo aveva straziato e che egli da gran tempo sinceramente detestava, non sapeva ancora strapparsela di dosso, giacché gli aveva procurato una vitalità fino allora mai conosciuta e la cui ripetizione egli intuiva impossibile.

I boschi cominciarono a diradare il loro ombroso spessore e quando la macchina arrivò al fondo di un declivio più degli altri scosceso, si aprirono verdi prati da pascolo divisi da filari di pioppi, che seguivano l'itinerario ondulato di qualche corso d'acqua. Il Motka provò a socchiudere gli occhi per vedere attraverso il torpore che così fingeva di cogliere il selvatico incanto della campagna. Ma essa nascondeva al suo fondo quell'incontro, da lui voluto ma non ravvisato concretamente, e il cui inevitabile imbarazzante contatto gli offriva già il presentimento di una situazione carica di riferimenti tormentosi. Gli vennero allora alle labbra versi che non rammentò di chi fossero: « Hier scheint die Sonne kalt, hier deucht mir alles unbekannt », qui tutto mi sembra sconosciuto. La mente era solo sfiorata da quei rami verde-argento diritti verso il cielo e risonanti di vento: altre immagini ormai premevano dal di dentro, che egli paventava e che salendo sul filo invisibile e ronzante del motore come insetti sotterranei e voraci, alla fine si impadronirono di lui. Il sofà di cretonne giallo, il tavolo di marmo con l'abatjour ricamato a mano, il puff e la tenda di velluto, la grande specchiera dalla cornice dorata e barocca che sormontava la mensola dei suoi profumi e dei suoi pettini, e nel quale egli fissava per lunghe ore il proprio viso disfatto dall'attesa e dalla gelosia, mentre in una sorta di anticipato delirio pronunciava l'eterna frase di saluto: « Dove sei stata? ».

Poi fu come se quel luminoso pomeriggio si fosse fatto nero di fonda notte, poiché il Motka rivide le serate trascorse seduto o inginocchiato di fronte alla donna, alle prese con un dialogo già conosciuto e non di meno irrevocabile, fatto di domande e di menzogne, che si faceva dapprima furioso e poi, poco alla volta, sempre più tenero e compassionevole. La sua mente si distrasse dalla strada che aveva rettilinea di fronte a sé, e rivide la faccia di lei, ferma in una espressione ambivalente di pietà e di finta offesa, dietro a cui come attraverso la filigrana di quella decenza che possedeva la stessa na-

tura superficiale e lavabile della sua cipria, egli scorgeva lo stupore divertito che la donna provava per quella isterica gelosia che il suo istinto corrotto la induceva a giudicare niente di più che una stramberia amorosa.

Un cartello di ferro smaltato, rossiccio di ruggine, posto sul muretto di pietra di un ponte, gli annunciò che mancavano ancora cinque chilometri per Herzberg. La strada si era assestata nella pianura e correva monotona e calda in mezzo a campi di granoturco ancora verde e girasoli altissimi.

Il sole era ben chiaro e pieno di calore e il Motka provò a sorridere, ma la memoria aveva estratto assieme a quei ricordi anche la loro qualità amara, e nuovamente egli si dolse di quel fraintendimento volgare delle sue idealità, che — egli ne era sicuro — essa mai si era sforzata di indagare, bastandole la coscienza di comportarsi proprio come le veniva richiesto dalla etichetta erotica, capricciosa e straniera della sua vana inquisizione. Quel legame era divenuto per lui un giro vizioso e desolante, nel quale, avendo coinvolto i suoi sentimenti più profondi, aveva finito per trascurare e poi per perdere finanche i suoi affetti familiari. Il Motka si riscosse e passandosi lentamente la palma della mano destra sulla fronte distolse da sé quelle immagini; ma la conclusione a cui si avvicinava ora per ora rimaneva confusa, se reputava provvidenziale l'allontanamento da Berlino e in pari tempo fastidioso il ritorno a casa, dalla quale non gli veniva che una sensazione opaca di lontananza.

Per questo anche egli aveva deciso di compiere quel servizio, che gli era stato assegnato a sua discrezione allo scopo di esaurire la pratica, e al quale non andava nessun interesse da parte di alcuno; il breve indugio che esso gli sarebbe costato a Herzberg, gli consentiva di essere al comando non prima dell'indomani e quindi di ridurre di quasi un giorno la sua ultima permanenza a Berlino e le occasioni di rivedere la donna.

Si trattava di una denuncia anonima contro un tecnico delle vetrerie Kohlen, la cui vera identità sarebbe stata quella di un aguzzino del campo di concentramento di Bergen Belsen, dato per disperso al tempo del processo del 1947.

Herzberg è una cittadina di pianta antica, senza periferia, improvvisa e compatta, rimasta fedele al tracciato delle sue mura e del Rahn, lo stretto e lento fiume che scorre lungo uno dei suoi quattro lati. Al di là del fiume si stende la zona industriale, sede di alcune fabbriche e del quartiere operaio. Passato il ponte che conduce a questa Herzberg recente, la modernità simmetrica e modesta delle sue costruzioni diede al Motka una apprensione angosciosa, come se si fosse trovato senza l'aiuto di una sia pur minima possibilità di difendersene — e di quale mai difesa aveva egli bisogno? — di fronte a un tu-

more o a una deformazione agghiacciante e razionale che avesse colpito per un qualche imperscrutabile destino la bellissima e disordinata città vecchia che aveva pochi istanti prima attraversato. Fermò la macchina per respirare con calma e per leggere nella pratica dell'uomo che stava cercando e che non aveva ancora scorsa, il nome e l'indirizzo esatto della sua abitazione. Non gli fu difficile trovarla. Questa abitazione era una piccola casa a un piano, circondata da un breve giardino senza alberi, simile a molte altre, allineate in ordine perfetto sulla stessa strada. Nulla vi era di nascosto o di imprevedibile in quel luogo, eppure egli rimase a lungo nella macchina in attesa di una decisione che lo avesse aiutato ad andarsene.

Quattro ragazzi sbucarono silenziosamente da una vicina traversa e si immobilizzarono diffidenti a guardarlo. Presa la borsa, egli scese dall'automobile e, varcato il cancelletto aperto, attraversò il viottolo di ghiaia davanti alla porta di ingresso. Il sole era ancora alto e sull'orizzonte di occidente che il signor Motka si voltò a guardare mentre aspettava che gli aprissero, si alzava una muraglia grigia e viola di nebbia e di nuvole. Il turbamento di poco prima non si era ancora placato del tutto, e già egli provava nello stomaco una specie di disgusto impotente, quasi che avesse inghiottito un cibo malsano e inconsueto. Pensò che dopotutto quelle sensazioni gli erano ormai familiari, avendo preso a subirle e a conoscerle da quando un qualsiasi particolare esterno, che tuttavia raramente riusciva a identificare anche se ne aveva avvertito la percezione, provocava attraverso oscure rimembranze la vergogna della struggente nostalgia di Anne. La donna che aveva aperto la porta senza alcun rumore, non parlava.

— Buongiorno — disse il signor Motka. — È qui che abita il signor Erich Kunz, vero?

La donna rispose un sì impercettibile. Non la vedeva bene in viso perché il sole la illuminava dal collo in giù. Si presentò come un funzionario dell'ONU.

— Mio marito non è in casa — disse. Aveva la voce opaca e velata di saliva, ma molto dolce. Il Motka usò i toni più cortesi di cui era capace e le chiese di aspettarlo. La donna lo invitò ad entrare. Chiusa dietro le sue spalle la porta d'ingresso, gli indicò con la mano aperta una stanza che si apriva sulla destra. — Si accomodi qui — disse.

La stanza era piccola, di forma quadrata, molto calda perché il sole la inondava attraverso i vetri chiusi e privi di imposte dell'unica finestra. Aveva i muri imbiancati a calce, ma il soffitto ricoperto di traversine di noce dipinto palesava una sia pur modesta pretesa di eleganza.

La donna era rimasta sulla porta. Doveva essere ancora giovane, sebbene la grossezza dei fianchi e un atteggiamento piuttosto pesante

del corpo le dessero l'apparenza di una età più matura. Aveva un bel viso ovale, con i chiari occhi tra il verde il grigio perfettamente consueti al biondo pallido della sua capigliatura. La bocca era piuttosto larga ma ben modellata.

— Posso essere utile io anche, in qualche cosa? — gli chiese.

— Perché no? Spero che a lei e a suo marito non dispiacerà che io abbia scelto voi per la mia indagine — disse il Motka.

— Stia comodo — gli rispose la donna e gli mostrò una poltrona di vimini vicina alla finestra. — Mio marito non sarà di ritorno prima di mezz'ora; il turno finisce alle quattro. Ma in cinque minuti è qui. — E aggiunse: Di solito.

— Se lei ha da fare, non si trattenga, non si faccia scrupoli — le disse il Motka.

— Stavo ascoltando la radio e i bambini dormono. Aspetto mio marito per mangiare.

— Quando è così, si sieda anche lei — le propose l'ospite.

La donna sembrò incerta tra il desiderio di lasciarlo solo e quello di restare per soddisfare la curiosità che aveva del resto favorito con le sue precedenti parole. Andò a sedersi dall'altra parte del tavolo di fronte al signor Motka, e si mise a fissarlo, le mani in grembo. Il Motka si accomodò nella poltrona e depose la borsa sul tavolo. Egli notò che non vi era ostilità nei suoi occhi e nemmeno apprensione, solo una quieta difensiva ansia femminile o forse neppure quella. La osservò anch'egli a lungo; aveva l'aria di una creatura che avesse fermato o perduto i nervi e la fantasia per assumere senza riserve il ruolo di un idolo razziale, casalingo e paziente.

— Lei è di Herzberg? — cominciò il signor Motka.

— Sono nata ad Apolda — rispose — molto lontano da qui.

— Apolda è in Turingia, o mi sbaglio? — le chiese.

— No, è proprio Turingia, vicino a Erfurt. Io mi chiamo Vildigen, e molte famiglie si chiamano così solo da noi.

— E come mai è capitata a Herzberg? — chiese il Motka.

— Per il lavoro di Erich. Lui ha un buon mestiere, è tecnico vetraio, e molto bravo anche, ma le fabbriche dalle nostre parti erano distrutte. Quelle poche rimaste su erano chiuse. Lui aveva sentito parlare delle vetrerie Kohlen. Per un po' restammo ad Apolda, tentò altri mestieri. E così alla fine siamo venuti qui. Ci siamo decisi e siamo venuti qui a Herzberg.

— Siete sposati da molti anni? —. La donna lo guardò con meraviglia; poi la bocca leggermente aperta si disegnò in un moderato sorriso.

— Ho ventitrè anni — disse. — Il fatto è magari che ne dimostro di più.

— Oh non proprio, non poi tanti — ribatté l'ospite. — Le donne

di qui vedete, l'ho notato in tutta l'alta Baviera, di solito sposano molto presto.

— Ma non sono della Baviera. È proprio così; i bambini hanno due e quattro anni e mezzo. — Alzò le mani congiunte e le riabbassò con lentezza, accompagnando il parlare. Concluse: — Ci siamo sposati sei anni fa.

— E suo marito? — le chiese il Motka.

— Cosa?

— È giovane come lei? — Dall'atteggiamento che mutò di colpo egli non capì se fosse riluttante a parlare di suo marito o risentita di non parlare più di sé.

— Mio marito ha trentasette anni — disse. Al Motka non sfuggì una breve esitazione come fosse sul punto di trattenere qualche parola o piuttosto di trovare quella adatta; non dimostrava infatti dimestichezza con il linguaggio corrente e aveva l'accento chiuso e pesante proprio delle persone di campagna. Continuò così: — È stato sempre in questo modo, e lei capisce, una ragione magari c'è che i vecchi siano gelosi, che vogliano matrimoni sicuri per le figlie, oh non gli so dar torto, e insomma non volevano Erich —. Si strinse con forza le mani, che si tinsero di colori più accesi, bianche e rosse, come se il ricordo che tanto inaspettatamente le era uscito dalla memoria avesse ancora il potere di stringerle il cuore. — Perché? — le chiese il Motka.

— Era solo e senza lavoro. Aveva di suo il sussidio. Mio padre diceva che glielo dia lo Stato va bene, ma prima che gliene dia io un secondo per il regalo che mi fa di portarsi via mia figlia, devono mettermi in manicomio.

— E adesso?

— Aspetti. È stata la nostra fortuna dopotutto, perché ce ne siamo venuti via. Lui non è certo andato al manicomio, ma non ha mai voluto parlare con Erich.

— Son cose che capitano — disse il Signor Motka. — Suo padre avrà avuto qualche ambizione, come ha detto lei del resto, è una cosa più che naturale. Basta aver pazienza, quando sentirà che avete la vostra casa. — La donna lo interruppe e disse: — La ragione non era la povertà, ma un'altra. Non lo conosceva, e nessuno lo conosceva.

— Questo non vuol dire. Succede così quasi sempre. E poi lei lo conosceva, oppure no, voglio dire da molti anni?

— No, Erich ha perso sette anni in guerra — gli rispose la donna.

— Neppur prima? — insistette il Motka.

— Io avevo dieci anni quando scoppiò la guerra.

— Oh, sì, è naturale — disse.

— E se io ribattevo che era un reduce, non apriva più bocca e non mi rivolgeva la parola per una settimana. — Il tono della sua

voce era stato sempre piuttosto calmo, ma al Motka accadde di notarlo, con un lieve stupore, solo allora.

— Non è del suo paese? — le domandò.

— No, Erich è nato in città — rispose.

— Dove?

— Hamm.

— Hamm? Ma è in Vestfalia, Hamm. — disse il Motka.

— Sì. Capitò a Apolda per combinazione. Sua madre era morta sotto un bombardamento a Duesseldorf, e aveva perduto la casa, naturalmente. Quasi un anno dopo la guerra.

La temperatura nella stanza era aumentata. L'ospite chiese alla donna se si poteva aprire la finestra. Per tutta risposta essa lo guardò un attimo al modo di chi viene irritato di sorpresa e poi disse:

— Siamo da poco qui. E dobbiamo ancora finirla —. Si alzò e andò ad aprire le lastre.

— Fa caldo qui dentro. Il prossimo inverno starete molto bene, le giornate di sole — osservò il Motka.

Gli rispose: — Abbiamo messo da parte i soldi del premio, mio marito ha avuto un premio di cinquecento marchi dalla fabbrica, per un sistema più rapido di pulitura delle superfici di non so che cosa —. La donna si fermò in attesa dell'effetto che doveva produrgli questa notizia. Egli la commentò con un complimento, poi essa riprese: — Devo comperare le tende, la stufa di maiolica, un tappeto certamente. Tra sei mesi sarà una casa discreta, forse. Se vuole stare più fresco può venire in cucina.

— Grazie, sto bene qui — le rispose il Motka — mi bastava un po' d'aria.

Udirono provenire dall'interno della casa un brontolio infantile. La donna che era rimasta in piedi, tra la porta e il tavolo, disse:

— Erich non ha fatto che andare avanti; ogni giorno. Questo interessa a lei?

— Sì, certo, soprattutto questo — rispose il Motka.

— Quando è entrato alle Kohlen era semplice operaio. Adesso è capo reparto.

— Avrà un buon stipendio immagino — disse. La donna fece una lunga pausa ed egli ebbe l'impressione che stesse pensando ad altro. Poi riprese a dire:

— Sì, molto buono, e stiamo tranquilli.

— I suoi lo sanno? — chiese il signor Motka.

— Lo sanno — rispose. Abbassò il viso, egli la vide prender fiato profondamente e poi alzare gli occhi acutamente sui suoi, con un movimento che mostrava un raccogliersi delle sue forze. — Ma a lei cosa interessa ancora di Erich? Quando torna a casa, di solito si riposa, dopo aver mangiato, ne ha un gran bisogno — disse.

— Non si preoccupi. Lo tratterrò per pochi minuti.

— Io so tutto su Erich. Le posso dare le informazioni che desidera. — La sua voce si era alterata. Il Motka rispose:

— Quello che mi ha detto è già quasi tutto. Stia tranquilla.

— Bene, allora compermesso. Otto si è svegliato — disse.

— La prego. Otto è un bel nome virile. È quello del nonno? — le chiese il Motka.

— No, lo ha scelto Erich — disse la donna senza neppure guardarlo e uscì. Il Motka restò a fissare la porta trasecolato di non essersi accorto fin dall'inizio che tutta quella improvvisa famigliarità della donna non era stata che un calcolato sacrificio per risparmiare al marito la sua presenza e il ritardo che avrebbe causato al suo riposo. Si riscosse pensando che non rientrava nei suoi compiti il cercare o il sollecitare una affabile ospitalità, e che tutto sommato anche se g'iel'avessero data sinceramente, sarebbe stato un favore per lui indifferente e in fondo assai poco lusinghiero.

Mancavano dieci minuti alle quattro. Il signor Motka estrasse dalla borsa l'incartamento della denuncia e cominciò a scorrerlo. Era un estratto degli atti del processo di Norimberga che si riferivano a Otto Kahn, e che il suo ufficio aveva preparato mentre egli svolgeva il servizio in Austria. Lesse che l'accusa sostenuta dal procuratore inglese signor Walpole era stata formulata in base alle testimonianze di dieci superstiti dell'ultimo gruppo di quattrocento internati del settore 2 F del campo di Bergen Belsen. Le testimonianze erano state raccolte dal Servizio Americano nel settembre e novembre del quarantacinque, nel febbraio, aprile e ottobre del quarantasei e nel gennaio del quarantasette.

All'inizio del processo nove di questi dieci superstiti erano deceduti, tutti per postumi e complicazioni delle lesioni riportate nel campo. L'accusa era diretta contro i tre subalterni che lo governavano, il sergente maggiore Weirot, il sergente Julian e il maresciallo Otto Kahn. Nel sunto preparatogli dall'ufficio erano riportate le parti delle testimonianze che si riferivano in particolar modo al Kahn, che stando alla denuncia anonima doveva celarsi sotto il nome falso di Erich Kunz. Seguiva poi il testo della requisitoria di Walpole. Il Motka si mise a leggere la deposizione del signor Zeller, olandese di Amsterdam, arrestato e deportato nel gennaio del '45.

« ...Afferma essere stati i primi mesi peggiori degli ultimi, contrariamente a quanto si sarebbe dovuto attendere.

Dep.: Avevo suscitato una particolare antipatia nel maresciallo Kahn. Ebbi fin dai primi giorni la sensazione che mi volesse far crollare nel cervello, col farmi assistere alle torture più repugnanti. (Brano su Weirot e Julian). Per me era lui il più feroce. Non riesco a ricordare quando, se nel primo periodo o dopo, non mi pare facesse

più tanto freddo, verso aprile forse, o marzo, una sera entrò nella baracca e chiamò me e un francese che dormiva nel castello sopra di me, il nome di questo disgraziato mi sfugge, Crainat o Crevaillat, un nome pressappoco così, se ci pensassi magari con un po' di pazienza magari, ci condusse sullo spiazzo dietro la baracca degli ebrei, ci fece togliere con le mani la lordura che aveva intasato il canale di scolo in prossimità della vasca. Era ubriaco e faceva lume con una torcia. Il mio compagno svenne mentre stava inginocchiato sul bordo del canale. Gli prese il capo e glielo tuffò nella melma. Così si riebbe. Lo aiutai a pulirsi gli occhi e la bocca, ma subito la nausea lo sopraffece e cadde una seconda volta in deliquio. Allora lo afferrò e lo scaraventò nella vasca, che non era profonda. Lui si alzò ma il maresciallo Kahn gli sparò con la pistola e lo colpì ad un occhio. Vidi della materia cerebrale uscirgli dall'orbita e si mise a urlare. Cadde in ginocchio e poi scivolò giù. Cioè nella melma.

Risp.: Sì, sicurissimo, Otto Kahn. Lo ricordo bene perché quando una volta mi capitò di pulire il suo alloggio, lessi il suo nome sul certificato di una decorazione che mi pare di ricordare si riferiva alla campagna di Russia.

Risp.: Ripicca personale? Non scherzate con queste domande. Nei cinque mesi della mia prigionia a Bergen Belsen, eliminò di sua mano circa quaranta persone. Prima ho parlato di antipatia per esprimere quello che ciascuno di noi provava di fronte a lui; non so come dirlo, ci faceva sentire in un certo senso colpevoli nei suoi confronti, o meglio che ciascuno avesse una responsabilità personale o un debito personale di fronte a lui.

Risp.: Il campo aveva a disposizione due di quei camion attrezzati per l'asfissia, oltre a un forno crematorio. Kahn si serviva esclusivamente di quelli, e li faceva funzionare soprattutto per gli ebrei. (Particolari sui metodi; vedi la deposizione successiva più completa ed esauriente).

Risp.: No certo, non solo gli ebrei. Quelli dei nostri che non potevano più lavorare. La selezione la faceva quasi sempre lui, voglio dire Kahn ».

Il Motka interruppe la lettura perché si sentì disturbato. Un'ombra nuova era penetrata nella stanza, insinuandosi tra i pochi particolari che il suo occhio aveva già assorbito e tranquillamente localizzato in un preciso equilibrio. Voltò il viso di lato e vide controluce un uomo che lo stava fissando al di là della finestra che dava sul giardino, e gli sembrò vicinissimo, quasi che il suo busto si trovasse sopra il davanzale.

— Lei è il padrone di casa, suppongo — disse il Motka.

— Buongiorno. Ora vengo — gli rispose l'altro con un mezzo sorriso, e scomparve oltre il muro. La donna dovette sentire il ru-

more della serratura perché il Motka la vide passare nel corridoio verso la porta d'ingresso. Dopo lentissimi istanti, durante i quali egli non percepì alcun bisbiglio, comparvero tutti e due nella stanza. L'uomo volle dimostrargli subito una cortesia ossequiosa, chinandosi nello stringergli la mano, sino quasi a toccarla con la fronte.

— Sua moglie le ha comunicato il motivo della mia visita? — questo chiedendogli, il Motka gli mise nella mano il cartoncino con le sue generalità, accompagnate dalla qualifica di ispettore dell'ufficio statistiche dell'ONU. L'uomo vi gettò una rapida occhiata e lo invitò a risedersi.

— Non è una poltrona molto comoda ma è la migliore della casa — disse.

— È la sua personale, immagino.

— No invece, è proprio per gli ospiti e lei la inaugura. Io non ho molto tempo per goderla. Devo preferirle la fabbrica e poi la cucina e il letto.

— So che lei è stanco, ma le porterò via pochissimo tempo — gli disse il signor Motka.

— Ma no, ma no. Non abbiamo molte visite, sa; lei è la prima persona in questa casa, se togliamo l'ingegner Verheim, ma quella fu una visita di prammatica, vero Elisa? Porta qualcosa da bere al signore. Cosa preferisce, birra o caffè?

— Non si disturbi.

— Allora portaci della birra, ma che sia fresca. Avrà certamente sete, eh con questo caldo! — disse. Alternava modi e inflessioni servili ad atteggiamenti di una pretenziosa sicurezza, e poiché egli passava dagli uni agli altri di colpo e senza sfumature, all'udito del Motka essi giunsero come suoni di strati diversi e lontani nel tempo, risaliti assieme alla superficie del suo interlocutore, per una contrastata timidezza della sua natura o forse per una allarmata e confusa diffidenza.

La donna era uscita dalla stanza. Il Motka riprese la cartella che aveva deposto chiusa sul tavolo e se la dispose sulle ginocchia. — Il signor Erich Kunz, lei, dunque?

— Per servirla — gli rispose l'altro, mentre egli scriveva il suo nome su di un foglio bianco. Gli disse: — L'ONU sta svolgendo una complessa indagine sulla ripresa economica della Germania. Questo è quello che curo io. Il questionario è facile, neppure troppo lungo. Parli a velocità normale perché stenografo. Vuole cominciare?

— Ma certo, sono a sua disposizione — gli rispose l'altro.

— Allora data e luogo di nascita, paternità, studi — disse il Motka.

— Sono nato trentasette anni fa, ne compirò trentotto tra due mesi, eh sono vecchio più di lei, a giudicare così su due piedi. A Hamm in Vestfalia; mio padre non lo ricordo, ero nato da poco quando morì. In miniera, vi sono miniere di lignite vicino a Hamm, in

Vestfalia, naturalmente non abitavamo proprio in città, così almeno ho capito dai ricordi di mia madre; essa decise che per nulla al mondo dovevo fare il minatore. Mia madre è scomparsa in questa guerra.

Per quanto poco interesse il Motka prestasse alla questione, purtuttavia ammise con se stesso che si era aspettata una faccia diversa. L'attendibilità della denuncia da un lato, e in maggior grado l'idea che l'anormalità dei campi di sterminio non potesse aver trovato sede che in esseri dall'aspetto eccezionale, lo avevano indirizzato verso la previsione di un volto affatto particolare. Quello invece che aveva di fronte era tanto comune e regolare che gli pareva di averlo già incontrato dappertutto in Germania, migliaia di volte. Non poté fare a meno di registrare il senso di scontentezza che gli veniva da una tale considerazione: ancora una volta la fretta della sua immaginazione lo aveva indotto ad anticipare sulla realtà con un arbitrio banale.

Forse che Anne — pensò egli — sarebbe divenuta fonte di tante estenuanti mistificazioni, se la sua sfrenata e infantile fantasia non l'avesse coperta di attributi, la cui mancanza essa stessa si era affrettata invano a testimoniargli fin dai primi appuntamenti nella gelateria della Westtorstrasse? Come già da tempo si era reso conto, egli utilizzava elementi di opinioni convenzionali, sorte per lo più nel fermento dell'adolescenza, non per capire, ma per costringere esperienze che non aveva entro le sue modeste idealizzazioni; e così le doti che aveva creduto di scorgere nelle ragazze del suo ambiente le aveva assegnate a una donna che viveva i suoi sensi con ingorda libertà.

Riportandosi a Kunz tuttavia, il Motka notò che nel suo caso la previsione sbagliata non gli riusciva del tutto sgradevole. Di più, se un certo vezzo di seguire le sue parole con continui cenni di consenso che realizzava con la bocca e gli occhi spalancati, non fosse riuscito meschino e ridicolo, egli sarebbe stato sul punto di giudicare l'impressione generale che aveva ricevuto da quell'uomo piuttosto simpatica.

Gli rispose: — Sua moglie me lo ha detto, sì, bombardamento vero? Mi dispiace.

— Destino — rispose — proprio destino. Sapesse quante volte glielo avevo scritto: « Torna a Ricka, torna a Ricka », macché; era un posto a venti chilometri da Duesseldorf, dove aveva trascorso la convalescenza dopo una operazione all'uretra. In città aveva un modestissimo giro di affari come camiciaia, e diceva di ricevere prima le mie lettere. Poi vi abitavamo da parecchi anni, e si sentiva meno sola, capisce?

— Non avevate parenti a Duesseldorf? — gli chiese il Motka.

— Nessuno, no. I miei erano di Gladen sull'Elba, originari veramente. Avevano viaggiato molto, Polonia per esempio, erano stati fino a Riga, vicino a Riga e poi in altri posti; come dopo del resto,

lei e io, prima in Slovacchia, come lavorante in un'industria tessile, e poi qua e là, fino al momento in cui ci stabilimmo a Duesseldorf.

— Anche in Belgio, no? — disse la donna che era entrata poco prima nella stanza e si era fermata ad ascoltare le parole del marito, reggendo un boccale di birra e due bicchieri. L'uomo la considerò un momento come soprapensiero.

— Ma certo, in Belgio — disse.

— Dove? — chiese il Motka. L'uomo lo guardò con la stessa espressione che aveva rivolta alla donna, difficile da definire, ma certo molto diversa da quella che aveva mostrato fino a quel momento. Poi distolse gli occhi sul pavimento, aggrottando la fronte, come per richiedere uno sforzo alla memoria, ma anche, forse — rifletté il Motka — per prendere tempo.

— A Dettingen, mi pare. Per poco, comunque prima che avessi compiuto dieci anni. Brutti tempi quelli, oh e come! Non potevamo dirci fortunati, sa. Mia madre poi confondeva i nostri viaggi con quelli fatti con mio padre, li ripeteva continuamente, specie negli ultimi tempi, cioè li metteva gli uni sopra gli altri, capisce?

— Nato a Hamm, dunque — disse il Motka prendendo l'appunto.

— Ah, sì, vi erano capitati otto mesi circa prima della sua morte. Adesso quella miniera è chiusa.

— Vi è ritornato? — chiese il Motka.

— Sì, appena finita la guerra. — L'uomo lasciò passare qualche secondo prima di continuare. Il Motka disse un « E come... » e l'altro proseguì subito, dicendo:

— Senza una ragione; ero stato smobilitato da quelle parti; una ragione così, sentimentale veramente, si può capire, c'era la tomba di mio padre, per questo. Ma non la trovai, vi era passata la linea del fronte. E seppi che la miniera era stata chiusa parecchi anni prima.

— Era una miniera importante? — gli domandò il Motka.

— No, non grande. Non ricordo neppure il nome. Ci trasferimmo a Duesseldorf dopo un lungo pellegrinaggio, glielo ho già detto questo. Purtroppo non vi era molto da scegliere per noi. Ma a Duesseldorf andò meglio che altrove. Se lei pensa che ottenemmo la residenza appena nel '40, e perché io ero sotto le armi dal trentasette, ce la diedero, come volontario. Ma insomma... Andammo ad abitare nel quartiere più povero, attorno a Weiniger Platz. Però riuscì a farmi studiare.

— Conosco Duesseldorf. Weiniger Platz è dietro la stazione, no? — disse il Motka; egli si rendeva conto che la conversazione veniva trascinata da quelle risposte nel binario fisso di un interrogatorio. Il signor Kunz se ne doveva essere accorto.

— Sì, proprio — rispose.

— Mi pare che sia stato completamente distrutto quel quartiere — disse il Motka.

— Proprio così. Un macello, ah! Non ritrovai vivo nessuno degli amici di casa.

— E purtroppo è triste, lo so. Questa è la condizione di molti tedeschi, non più un parente o un amico — disse il Motka. E poi gli chiese:

— Lei non trovò nessuno in conclusione?

— Ecco sì, lei dice esattamente: nessuno proprio.

La donna che si era affacciata sulla porta, interruppe il dialogo e con una intonazione che non lasciava spazio per i dubbi sul suo sentimento astioso nei confronti dell'ospite, disse: « Erich, tu devi mangiare; almeno un boccone. Il signore ti può aspettare, spero ».

L'uomo finse di non dar peso a quelle parole e rivolto al Motka disse:

— Fa sempre piacere discorrere con una persona intelligente. Davvero. Io potrei benissimo continuare, se lei ha fretta.

— Ma no — rispose il Motka. — Ho tutto il pomeriggio a disposizione. Non faccia complimenti. Finirò di bere questa birra.

— E allora, sa come sono queste donne — e inseguendo con la voce la moglie che si era subito ritratta dalla stanza, senza aspettare la sua risposta, gridò: — Vengo, ora vengo. Compermesso.

Quella interruzione cadde a proposito, giacchè ritrovarsi solo fu un vero sollievo per il signor Motka, anche se i motivi di ciò gli sfuggissero. Provava la stessa sonnolenza agitata che lo invadeva quando dopo un lungo periodo di abitudini fisse, la loro cadenza regolare veniva spezzata da un fatto insolito, che per quanto semplice era da quelle così completamente difforme da somigliare a uno dei tanti sogni o incubi già trascorsi. Sensazione rara — e che appunto da gran tempo egli non provava — per chi di abitudini in senso stretto non ne ha più; quale era appunto il suo caso, dato che da tre anni girava la Germania venendosi a trovare ogni volta in situazioni per lo più diverse l'una dall'altra, ma proprio per ciò — e se ne stava avvedendo da tutta una serie di piccoli affannosi particolari fisici — tanto più acuta e opprimente. Nonostante egli tentasse di convincersi che quel viaggio e quell'incontro appartenevano alle realtà prevedibili e non possedevano alcun carattere preoccupante, qualcosa nel meccanismo con cui erano avvenuti doveva aver provocato una risonanza profonda e sinistra. Si domandò se anche questo doveva attribuirlo ad Anne. Certo una parte di lei era entrata con lui in quella stanza e sul suo sfondo neutro e incolore non aveva mai smesso di muoversi. Egli pensò tuttavia che in fondo era il signor Kunz a metterlo a disagio di fronte a se stesso, poiché a causa sia di quei particolari inutili ed assurdi delle miniere e del cimitero e dei viaggi suoi e di suo padre, sia della sua affabilità servizievole e diffidente, non riusciva a connettere i fili che avrebbero dovuto legarlo a quella situazione. Il Motka non trovò

altro espediente per neutralizzare quello stato di incipiente nevrosi, che rimettersi a leggere il rapporto. La seconda deposizione era stata fatta da un altro olandese di nome Alkmeede. In una nota allegata egli lesse che questo Alkmeede era stato interrogato dalla commissione d'inchiesta in una casa di cura per malattie mentali a Groninga, dove era stato ricoverato subito dopo la fine della detenzione a Bergen Belsen, per stato depressivo con sintomi di epilessia, e paranoia acuta e ossessiva.

« Depos.: Se vi era qualche differenza tra quei tre? Julian era alto, aveva i capelli bruni quasi neri, la carnagione scura, secco e asciutto, poteva essere austriaco sebbene il nome non lo sia. Weinach era di media statura come Kahn, e tutti e due avevano i capelli chiari, ma il primo era di carnagione pallida e di corporatura esile, il secondo invece, Kahn, era robusto e sembrava fatto con la carne del vitello di latte. Ecco. In questo si distinguevano e anche in altre particolarità. nel timbro della voce, nel modo di camminare, come io e lei o come io e lei.

Risp.: Sì, mi avete capito a meraviglia, è proprio questo che intendevo dire. Nel comportamento con noi, nei rapporti, perché rapporti pure erano eh?, si assomigliavano come dei gemelli. Oh, sì, sparavano in maniera diversa, magari. Julian teneva diritto il braccio in direzione del bersaglio e urlava minacce, che però non contenevano inviti ad alzarsi, io per fortuna capisco molto, molto bene il tedesco. Kahn al contrario non proferiva una sola parola e teneva il braccio aderente al fianco. Evidenti diversità di scuola.

Risp.: Dopo il controllo serale, ad esempio, piuttosto spesso negli ultimi tempi, questione di adattamento progressivo, al ritorno dalla fabbrica, se qualcuno non arrivava a stare in piedi e si buttava per terra, e per qualche capriccio, capriccio, capricciosi... dicevo che se non lo mandavano alla cosiddetta infermeria, dovevamo scostarci perché lo sparavano.

Risp.: No, di solito nessuna reazione, nessuno sforzo di rialzarsi, nessun gesto di paura, quasi mai, qualche volta con Julian, perché gridava e questo doveva ferire il sistema nervoso, e perciò in quei momenti era preferibile Kahn che non diceva niente. Molte volte io stesso sono stato sul punto di farlo, e sarebbe stato un peccato perché non avrei potuto compiere quello che il mondo attende da me. Se si cadeva sapevamo quello che ci aspettava. Molti lo fecero proprio perché lo sapevano.

Risp.: Voi siete in errore. Non c'era ferocia in loro, almeno fino a quando ho potuto servirmi di tutte le mie facoltà mentali non l'ho creduto mai. La ferocia non può che essere individuale, oh i tedeschi starebbero meglio se io dicessi che era una ferocia individuale. Qualcuno di voi che mi state interrogando, sarà giornalista, o lo divente-

rà nell'apprendere simili esperienze, per diffonderle, glielo auguro. Permettetemi di darvi un consiglio. Se volete che la gente capisca, non usate i termini di belva o di bestia feroce. È un grosso errore. Kahn era un uomo. Sapeva che avevamo gli intestini, le ossa e il sistema nervoso come i suoi. Kahn e gli altri ne erano al corrente. Eppure quando riceveva in consegna gli ebrei, diceva loro che li portava a disinfettarsi per poterli trasferire puliti in un campo di riposo, dove avrebbero trovato cure e assistenza alle loro malattie e debolezze, e intendeva parlare del cielo. Io gli sentivo le identiche parole ogni volta, perché quando questo succedeva non andavo alla fabbrica. Facevo parte del gruppo di becchini. Kahn era proprio un uomo, simile a me e a voi, un nostro fratello, no? Li faceva spogliare e li spingeva nel camion. Trenta alla volta in uno spazio dove voi con tutta la buona volontà non arrivereste a mettervi più che in quindici. Essi comprendevano alla fine e lo guardavano come per chiedere a lui conto delle sue promesse, e per fargli capire che ci avevano creduto, e lui si accorgeva di questo spaventosamente muto, spaventosamente rassegnato, di questo loro terrore e non batteva ciglio, come se la cosa, il rimprovero e l'appello o lo stupore inumano non lo riguardasse e perché poi avrebbe dovuto riguardarlo, finché la maggior parte era salita. Ma dopo gridava senza infuriarsi mai però, come si fa con i bambini o con i cani, a quelli che erano rimasti a terra, perché non capivano come si potesse pretendere che salissero quando i compagni avevano occupato tutto il posto e sporgevano già fuori con il corpo, minacciando di cadere. Lui allora li prendeva e li cacciava dentro uno alla volta e se ricadevano li riprendeva e li spingeva di nuovo e se erano leggeri, piccole donne o bambini, li buttava al di sopra degli altri, dato che il cassone del camion era alto.

Risp.: Io stavo a una quarantina di metri, a un livello più basso, in una delle grandi buche che avevamo scavato a spina di pesce ai lati di una strada che si perdeva nei campi, oltre la torretta e il filo spinato del recinto. L'avrò fatto venti volte quel lavoro. E mi confesso qui, che lo facevo con sollievo perché stancava molto meno della fabbrica. Essi non avevano modo di vedere noi, ma noi vedevamo molto bene tutta la scena. Kahn chiudeva a fatica la portiera di lamierino e accendeva il motore, che era collegato con il cassone. Poi veniva a controllare il lavoro della fossa, dalla strada. La faccenda non durava mai meno di tre quarti d'ora, e di solito lasciava acceso il motore ancora per dieci minuti, dopo che l'ultimo gemito si era spento. Se assisteva il comandante del campo, Kahn si agitava e compiva più in fretta tutte le operazioni, e a noi gridava da vicino al camion, senza venire sulla strada. Poi portava il camion vicino alla fossa, con la bocca del cassone rivolta verso di noi. Noi dovevamo aprire la portiera e i primi cadevano giù da soli, rigidi come se fossero stati di legno.

Avevano un colore come se la loro carne fosse diventata di ambra verde chiaro ed erano sporchi di feci lungo le gambe, o per tutto il corpo se erano bambini, perché le feci dei grandi erano colate loro addosso. Una delle prime volte Kahn ci informò che era un processo fisiologico incontrollato, e doveva essere proprio così, che i visceri si liberavano o per la paura o per reazione irriflessa dell'asfissia, un istante prima che l'organismo morisse.

Risp.: No, Kahn non li toccava, per amor del cielo, non guardava neppure. Ci voltava la schiena fino a quando non li avevamo disposti a mucchi regolari, poi, allorché i rumori celesti erano cessati, scaricava il mitragliatore per evitare sorprese o irregolarità. Naturalmente questo non succedeva sempre ma solo se il forno crematorio era troppo impegnato, anzi piuttosto di rado, perché erano ben organizzati. Non hanno lasciato tracce. Voi vi affannate a cercarle, qualcuna non dico sarete anche capaci di trovarla. Ma di tutti proprio? Ammettiamo che ci riusciate, quanti potrebbero essere, facciamo un calcolo approssimativo, diciamo mille, va bene? Così voi li prendete tutti e mille. E poi? Questo io vi domando, e poi? Un bel processo, nevvero, circostanze attenuanti, omicidio preterintenzionale, obbedienza passiva che in parte è un concetto abbastanza esatto, e una conclusione che soddisfi il senso di giustizia, che ristabilisca — si dice proprio ristabilire vero? — l'ordine umano intaccato da questi « assassini », è così che voi li chiamate. Ma quale ordine, quale giustizia? La mia forse? No, nossignori, le tracce so io dove portano, non certo dove pensate voi. Le leggi del vostro mondo io non sostengo che non esistano, ma non qui. Qui c'è il caos creato da loro, e per sempre. Io ho aspettato in tutti quei lunghi giorni che almeno gli angeli scendessero con le spade accese, rabbiosi di castigo, questo vuol dire che l'inferno era quello, l'inferno che vi può essere nelle costellazioni, e che non c'era in alcuna altra parte, il mio e quello di sempre, un unico inferno. E allora poichè io l'ho avuto e fatto, nessun altro inferno mi attende più, e la bilancia è solo nelle mie mani. Mi viene da ridere, scusate se penso a quello che immaginate che potrei fare se mi portaste davanti, qui, Julian o quel Kahn. Niente, assolutamente. Io li rifiuto. Io voglio gli altri. Proprio Kahn no! Troppo generoso che perdessi il mio tempo con lui. Anzi lui è innocente. Mi riempiva la pancia di calci, mi torturava la testa con la sua cinghia, e senza dire una parola. Ebbene non so che farmene di quello. Io voglio un po' di tutti, a caso. Voi mi state parlando in questa clinica e penserete che sia matto. Il dottor Weenehude, il primario, è al corrente della situazione, e sebbene non lo dia a vedere, mi appoggia con tutto il peso del suo prestigio. Egli è combattuto tra il dovere professionale e il dovere umano, perché si rende conto come me ne rendo conto io stesso, che a lungo andare questa vita che conduco la notte

mi stroncherà prima del tempo. Pure non mi ferma, ed anzi egli in persona mi apre la porta di servizio, non appena gli infermieri del turno di notte finiscono il giro. Ed è allora che io comincio la missione. Supero in pochi minuti la distanza che mi separa dal confine, e lo varco senza difficoltà. I contadini che incontro mi conoscono ormai e sanno cosa io vada a fare di là, e perciò fingono di non vedermi, perché in cuor loro mi benedicono. Una volta in Germania, non ho che l'imbarazzo della scelta, Aschendorf o Weener, e più giù vicino alla foce, Leer.

Arrivo di solito quando termina la proiezione dei film, ma preferisco quelli che escono dalle sale da ballo. È facile capire il perché: il loro sangue è allegro, perché hanno ancora eccitati gli occhi e i sensi. Qualche volta li sorprendo in coppia, che si stanno baciando o che fanno all'amore, dopo l'ultima casa, sul primo campo aperto, vicino alla strada. Naturalmente uso un coltello da caccia e taglio loro la gola. Se ho tempo a disposizione glielo immergo nello stomaco oppure nel basso ventre, ma sempre in modo che non muoiano prima che il tremendo dolore li abbia resi pazzi e ciechi. Più raramente quando piove o fa freddo entro nelle loro case. Comincio dai bambini, chiedendo dapprima i loro nomi, i bei nomi tedeschi, Karl, Gustav, Erika, Alfred, Hedwig, in modo che i genitori abbiano il tempo di prepararsi allo strazio. Sembrerebbe strano se non si afferrassero i motivi reconditi di tale comportamento, ma il fatto è che non si ribellano, e per quanto la cosa si sia già diffusa tra loro, non ne parlano. Questo facilita il mio compito, ma esso resta molto arduo ugualmente. Purtroppo lo so, gli anni e le forze non mi basteranno per portarlo a termine, almeno nella misura del mio obbligo morale. (I fatti narrati nell'ultima parte della presente deposizione sono risultati al controllo privi di fondamento. Il signor Alkmeede è morto nella clinica W. di Groninga il 4 maggio 1947. Nota di pugno del sostituto procuratore signor Maller) ».

Quella lettura aveva stancato il Motka. Egli chiuse l'incartamento nella borsa e spinse la poltrona vicino alla finestra: una grande commozione lo invase, che sul momento non riuscì nemmeno a capire da dove gli fosse sgorgata. Si alzò in piedi e si appoggiò sul davanzale; era come se il nodo di quei sentimenti confusi, che con tanta ostinazione aveva represso nel corso della missione austriaca e che aveva contrastato anche durante quel tonificante viaggio in macchina da Weemunde a Herzberg, avesse trovato di che sciogliersi repentinamente e tutto assieme. Il sole cominciava a prendere le cose di sbieco, allungando le ombre delle case di fronte e del muretto del giardino, e già i colori erano meno soffocati, essendo diminuito il peso della luce. L'aria si stava muovendo un poco e un gruppo di ragazze si scambiava parole allegre da una parte e dall'altra della strada; ma un

maggior movimento vi era dappertutto, in mezzo ai piccoli giardini e alle finestre, accompagnato da voci e da rumori casalinghi, che prima, al suo arrivo, egli non aveva notato.

Vi era una sorta di confidenza in quel modesto e purtuttavia lieto spettacolo, di invito alla franca semplicità e a una domestica beatitudine, che parve al Motka di poter interpretare come le virtù di quella vita che aveva vagheggiato con adolescente insistenza dietro l'amore per Anne, e con l'aiuto delle quali aveva a lungo immaginato di poterlo preservare intatto per il suo futuro. Le parole: « Voglio portarti via con me » che ripetutamente erano entrate nei suoi sogni ad alta voce con lei, non avevano mai avuto altro approdo possibile che quello che gli stava dinanzi in quel momento reale, e che essa con la sua risposta allegra, sprezzante e sempre identica, tanto incredibilmente aveva anticipato e previsto: « Sì, saresti capace di imprigionarmi in una di quelle case prefabbricate di periferia, col giardinetto uguale a quello dei vicini ». Egli respinse risolutamente quei sentimenti e quella voce che risuonava così vera dentro di lui; Anne aveva avuto ragione ed era una autentica stoltezza ricadere con tanta facilità e per una occasione così estranea nel rimpianto di insensate fantasticherie.

In quel punto il Motka si risovvenne dell'espediente al quale l'ipocrisia della donna la faceva ricorrere quando era stretta d'assedio dalle sue irreali proposte, e cioè quella frase: « Sei così strano tu, qualche volta », che pronunciava guardandolo intensamente tra gli occhi e la fronte, quasi ad accreditare con la legittimità che ne derivava i suoi rifiuti. « Al fondo della abiezione » — mormorò a fior di labbra il Motka — e codeste parole ebbero il potere di sospendere le dolorose rievocazioni, e la loro eco interna lo inebriò di sordo stupore. Poi si domandò, riscotendosi, se doveva dunque ancora lottare e dibattersi prima di potersi considerare fuori del pericolo di incontrare in qualsiasi luogo e istante i richiami di quel sentimento. La pietà che gli sembrava di avvertire per se stesso nelle pieghe dell'animo poteva essere una medicina efficace. E quella strada e il giardino che aveva sotto di sé potevano rallegrargli gli occhi per mille motivi più semplici e salutari, non ultimo quello che qualcosa del genere lo aveva pur lui in patria, dove sarebbe tornato tra poco per vivervi tranquillo, anche senza di Anne.

— Lo devo ancora lavorare sul serio — gli disse indicandogli il giardino il signor Kunz, che era entrato nella stanza e si era venuto a mettere accanto a lui presso la finestra, senza che egli lo avesse sentito, immerso com'era nei suoi pensieri. — Lo farò non appena mi giungeranno le piante che ho ordinato in Olanda.

— Quando la superficie non è molto grande — disse il Motka — conviene la begonia doppia in cespuglio o le dalie anche.

— Ma guarda! Anche a lei piacciono? Ne ho giusto ordinato tre varietà, multiflora, pendenti e bizzarre. Dice che ho fatto bene?

— Certo. Hanno una fioritura abbondante e abbastanza lunga. E poi fanno il giardino più grande — rispose il Motka.

— Lei dunque è appassionato di giardinaggio, si capisce!

— Appassionato proprio non direi; ho un giardino ecco tutto. — Il Motka si volse e tornò a sedersi nella poltrona, dopo averla riavvicinata al tavolo. Gli chiese se voleva continuare. L'altro dovette fraintendere il senso della sua domanda, perché farfugliò alcune parole mortificate di scusa. Il Motka ritenne di doversi giustificare e chiarire, adducendo il pretesto del disturbo che gli recava e la fretta, e ciò accrebbe ulteriormente il suo nervosismo senza aquietare il Kunz. Questi gli parlò del periodo di guerra; disse di aver partecipato a tutte le campagne offensive in Russia, sino dalla prima battaglia di Rostov, come sottufficiale di fanteria. Più tardi, dopo un periodo di addestramento svolto nei dintorni di Varsavia sotto le SS, era stato aggregato ai reparti di polizia che operavano dietro il fronte contro i partigiani. Il Motka fu colpito dalla sicurezza meccanica con la quale citava date e località; lo interruppe per domandargli se i metodi di quella guerriglia lo avessero soddisfatto come soldato.

— La guerra era dura — gli rispose — e gli ordini che avevamo erano severissimi. D'altronde la legge militare contro i franchi tiratori mi pare che sia identica in tutti gli eserciti. O Dio, forse qualche volta il comando esagerava in prudenza. Se vuol sapere il mio pensiero, fu una esperienza che un uomo civile deve dimenticare oggi. Se mi costringessero ad arruolarmi di nuovo, resisterei con la forza. Chi è riuscito a scampare da quei luoghi, ha diritto di lavorare in pace, e pensare alla famiglia. Anche lei condivide questa idea, vero? — gli domandò il signor Kunz.

— Oh, si può senz'altro condividere. E là, rimase in quel corpo sino alla fine della guerra? — e alzando gli occhi dal foglio dove andava segnando tutti quei dati, il Motka gli chiese ancora: — Foste mai utilizzati in campi di concentramento? — L'altro non ebbe un solo attimo di esitazione a rispondergli: — Non c'erano campi di concentramento in zona di guerra —. Poi tacque probabilmente in attesa di altre domande, che però il Motka non fece. Allora continuò dicendogli che dopo la ritirata del Dnieper erano stati incorporati nuovamente nella fanteria, avevano combattuto fino alla fine e che quasi tutti i suoi compagni erano rimasti sul campo due giorni prima della cessazione delle ostilità, nella battaglia di Chemnitz.

In quel momento si affacciò sulla porta un bambino a piedi nudi che ristette indeciso, strofinandosi uno dei polpacci con le dita dell'altro piede, finché il signor Kunz non lo spronò a entrare. — Questo è Hans — disse, abbracciando il bambino che si era rifugiato

tra le sue gambe. Il bambino si voltò dalla parte del Motka e questi vide nei suoi occhi il timore, la curiosità e l'aspettativa che la sua presenza gli stava suscitando. Era un bambino magro e pallido, con i capelli biondi tagliati corti e gli occhi piccoli e celesti, simili a quelli del padre.

— Come va? — gli disse il signor Motka, mentre il padre si era piegato con la bocca vicino al suo orecchio e gli suggeriva i saluti da dire all'ospite. Il bambino lo esaminava da sotto in su. — Quanti anni hai? — chiese il Motka.

— Ha quattro anni e mezzo — rispose il signor Kunz. — Adesso che hai visto il signore, digli buonasera e ritorna dalla mamma; il papà sta lavorando.

— Oh, mi pare che abbiamo finito — disse il Motka — il bambino può restare, se ciò lo diverte.

— Oggi sono stato nella mia casa — uscì a dire il bambino.

— È qui vicino la tua casa? — gli domandò il Motka.

— Non molto — rispose con sussiego — devo prendere la macchina per andarci. E poi oggi avevamo visite, e mia moglie ha avuto il suo da fare. L'ho dovuta aiutare parecchio — annunciò.

— Oh — disse il Motka — capisco. Chi è tua moglie?

Il signor Kunz lo stava ad ascoltare con compiaciuta apprensione. Spiegò all'ospite che la moglie era la figlia dei vicini, e che Hans aveva preso l'abitudine da un po' di tempo di giocare ai grandi, rifacendo i discorsi che sentiva tra lui e sua moglie. Il bambino attese che i due uomini tacessero e poi sempre fissando il Motka ricominciò a vuotare il sacco.

— Tu non puoi conoscerla. Non puoi conoscere anche me: qui siamo sconosciuti tutti e due almeno — spiegò, e poi stropicciandosi le mani e facendo con le labbra tirate da una parte un rumore che doveva essere di soddisfazione: — così stiamo in pace, sai. Ma tu puoi venire a trovarci lo stesso. È prudente.

Il signor Kunz lo afferrò per un braccio con fermezza e gli disse dolcemente:

— Ora vai, torna in cucina dalla mamma —. Il bambino gli lanciò uno sguardo ostile e divincolandosi dalla mano che lo stringeva più che occorresse, fece un mezzo passo avanti e rimase fermo davanti al Motka, con le mani dietro la schiena. Il Motka si sporse verso di lui e gli disse, atteggiando più che poté le sue parole a un tono di conversazione tra adulti: — Se proprio mi inviti, verrò a trovarti. Ma non saranno seccati i suoi genitori?

Il bambino gli rispose prontamente: — Ma noi abitiamo un'altra casa, più grande della sua. Loro non mi conoscono, oh ma io me ne strafrego. — Il bambino si strinse la cinghia dei pantaloni e aggiunse in una maniera conclusiva che contrastava con il significato delle pa-

role e che perciò richiamava altre frasi, diverse da quelle: — Pensano forse che io sia chissachì, un assassino. Se mi conoscessero, mi bacierebbero i piedi. E tu dove vai? Se ho tempo ti posso mostrare i miei giocattoli. Io dormo pochissimo, ma non occore che tu ti preoccupi.

Il signor Kunz lo interruppe dicendogli: — Ora va —. Il bambino gli rispose: — Aspetta — ma senza voltarsi, e toccando con l'indice il cappuccio della penna che sporgeva dal taschino del Motka, gli disse: — Anche questa è tua? Quante penne hai? — Doveva aver scorso la penna aperta sul tavolo — A cosa ti servono?

Gli rispose il Motka: — Effettivamente ne ho troppe. Questa puoi tenerla tu — e sfilata la penna dal taschino gliela lasciò nella mano con cui il bambino l'aveva già afferrata.

Il signor Kunz mostrò di non gradire quel regalo. — Ora davvero basta. Restituisci la penna e va di là in cucina. — Il suo tono era aspro più che severo. Il bambino lanciò un'occhiata all'ospite. — La può tenere — disse questi al signor Kunz.

— Tu non vuoi che io sia suo amico —; il suo viso era contratto nella smorfia del pianto imminente, e implorò: — Ma è un regalo.

— Basta — gridò il signor Kunz, e afferratolo con tutte e due le mani lo spinse fuori della porta, e tra le urla isteriche del bambino gridò alla moglie di trattenerlo in cucina. Quando rientrò aveva un'aria abbattuta.

— Non sappiamo come prenderlo. La sua volontà non ha mai limiti. È una fortuna che da qualche tempo dorma tutta la notte. Per esempio quando è nato, gli altri bambini dormono ventitre ore su ventiquattro, lui ne dormiva dieci, undici, sempre sveglio.

— È l'età in cui sono più vivaci. Mi è sembrato sano poi — disse il Motka.

— Sì, per fortuna è sanissimo, non sano — rispose l'altro.

— E poi ha una faccia sveglia e simpatica — disse il Motka. Il signor Kunz sembrò rasserenarsi di colpo e abbozzò un sorriso. — Sono molto divertenti, bisogna dirlo. Ma questo per il primo tempo ci ha reso la vita difficile; non può credere quello che abbiamo passato nella camera d'affitto, dove siamo stati fino all'anno scorso.

— Adesso però avete la vostra casa. Può ritenersi soddisfatto, anche se il bimbo è vivace. Ho sentito da sua moglie che il lavoro le sta dando delle concrete soddisfazioni — gli disse il Motka.

— Sì, sì, è proprio vero. Il lavoro, la famiglia, la casa. È la trinità migliore — gli rispose sorridendo il signor Kunz. Poi si rifece serio e sospirò: — Se li perdessi... — Il Motka sentì violento il bisogno di uscire da quella casa, e così guardò l'orologio: mancavano due ore all'appuntamento con il sergente, all'aeroporto. Poteva fare il ritorno con comodo, e forse anche fermarsi un istante a visitare la chiesa la cui maestosa facciata rinascimentale aveva scorto all'an-

data, accanto alle vecchie case del corso di Herzberg. Si alzò e chiuse l'incartamento nella borsa.

— Vado a chiamare mia moglie — disse il signor Kunz.

— No — la prego. Mi scusi con lei e le faccia i miei saluti —. La sua voce non era ferma ma il signor Kunz non insistette. — Le faccio strada allora — disse, e usciti dalla stanza aprì la porta d'ingresso. Se ne stava con la testa leggermente piegata da un lato e aveva sul viso una espressione cortese.

— Lei è mai stato a Bergen Belsen? — chiese il Motka e vide i muscoli della faccia di Kunz non reggere a un tentativo disperato di irrigidirsi; poi la fronte e le guance andarono man mano perdendo colore e sostanza, come se qualche pressione interna ne stesse aspirando l'umore e il sangue. Non rispose. Oh infine che cosa mai gli era saltato in mente di chiedergli? Ma altre parole erano già formate, inevitabili ormai, e le disse: — Ha conosciuto un certo Otto Kahn? — Quella era una tentazione di tormentarlo. Qualcosa di intricato e di pesante che gli stava sfiorando la mente. L'altro lasciò cadere lo sguardo, ma di poco, e aveva perciò l'aria di fissargli la gola. Ci furono alcuni istanti di silenzio; poi il Motka riprese:

— Perché Herzberg? Per un tecnico come lei è meglio la Renania. Farebbe meglio ai bambini anche. Oberhausen per esempio.

Guardò fuori. La muraglia di nuvole stava inghiottendo il sole. C'era già un impasto di grigio e di umidità nell'aria, presso i muri delle case. — Ci ho pensato qualche volta — rispose l'altro. Il Motka provò vergogna di quella voce che gli usciva morta. « Lo faccia allora » disse, incontrando il suo sguardo. Egli sentì che tra sé e quell'uomo ci doveva essere un legame, e che esso era repellente.

— Buonasera — disse il Motka, ma l'altro non rispose più. Egli attraversò in fretta il viottolo di ghiaia e salì in macchina. Emise un « aaa » di sollievo ad alta voce, e accese il motore. Gli pareva di essere molto stanco e se non avesse avuto la possibilità di trovare a Weemunde una cabina di vagone letto, se ne sarebbe rimasto a dormire nel primo albergo. Con un senso di remota tranquillità, come se gli elementi che fino allora lo avevano tenuto in sospeso tra l'ansia e la sfiducia avessero trovato finalmente il loro posto nella combinazione del suo cuore, voltati che ebbe gli occhi verso il giardino del signor Kunz, si rese conto che se ci fossero state le magnolie e il chiosco di legno verde a ridosso del muretto di cinta, la somiglianza con la sua casa sarebbe stata più pronunciata. Pensò anche che dopotutto avrebbe potuto riprendere in mano per davvero i libri e insegnare ancora, senza questi problemi di vivi, storia e letteratura tedesca. Si sentiva altresì capace di affrontare Anne per l'ultima volta, l'indomani, senza nulla rischiare né pretendere, né tantomeno doversi preparare all'ultimo incontro con qualche umile sogno.

E questa, nella sua stanchezza, era già una sensazione benefica.

NOTE BIO-BIBLIOGRAFICHE

degli autori che appaiono, nel presente volume, per la prima volta in « Botteghe Oscure »

VICENTE ALEIXANDRE (1898, Sevilla, España). Vivió toda su infancia en Málaga. Estudió en Madrid Derecho y Comercio, siendo después profesor de Derecho Mercantil. Desde 1925 se dedica por entero a la literatura. Obras (poesía): *Ambito; Espadas como Labios; Pasión de la Tierra; La Destrucción o el Amor* (Premio Nacional de Literatura 1933); *Sombra del Paraiso; Mundo a Solas; Nacimiento Ultimo; Historia del Corazón.* Es miembro de la Real Academia Española.

JAIME GIL DE BIEDMA (1929, Barcelona, España). Obras: *Según Sentencia del Tiempo,* 1953 (poesía); *Función de la poesía y función de la crítica* (traducción de T. S. Eliot, Barcelona, 1956).

EMMANUEL CARBALLO (1929, Guadalajara, Jalisco, México). Comenzó a escribir poesía en 1950 y publica la « Revista Mexicana de Literatura ».

RICAREDO DEMETILLO (1920, Iloilo Province, Philippines). Studies at Silliman University at Negros, and at Iowa State University. He has published critical work on painting and writing and received a Rockefeller Grant in 1952. His first book of poems, *No Certain Weather,* has just been published by the University of the Philippines at Diliman, Quezon City, where he is currently teaching.

LUCIA DRUDI (1924, Venezia, Italia). Ha pubblicato qualche prosa sulla rivista *L'Immagine.*

LEON FELIPE (1884, Tábara, Zamora, España). Estudió la carrera de Farmacia y fué actor y director de teatro en su juventud. Ha vivido en España, Africa y América, siendo profesor de español y cultura española en las Universidades de Cornell y Panamá. Fija su residencia en

México, donde va al acabar la guerra civil española. Obras: 1920, *Versos y Oraciones* (Madrid y Nueva York); 1930, *Drop a Star* (Nueva York); 1934, *Antología* (Madrid); 1937, *La Insignia* (Valencia); 1938, *El Payaso de las Bofetadas y el Pescador de Caña* (México); 1939, *El Hacha* (México); 1939, *El Español del Exodo y del Llanto* (México); 1940, *El Gran Responsable* (México); 1943, *Ganarás la Luz* (México); 1947, *Antología Rota* (Buenos Aires); 1947, *El Viento y Yo* (México); 1950, *Llamadme Publicano* (México). Paráfrasis: 1943, *Canto a mí mismo,* de Walt Whitman (Buenos Aires); 1951, *Que no Quemen a la Dama,* de Christopher Fry (México); 1953, *No es Cordero, que es Cordera,* de Shakespeare — Noche de Reyes — (Cuadernos Americanos); 1954, *Macbeth o el Asesino del Sueño,* de Shakespeare (México); 1956, *El Juglarón* (inédito). Teatro: 1955, *La Manzana* (Cuadernos Americanos).

C. L. RAHMES FILBY (1935, London, England, of Indian extraction). Studied in London where she published a few poems in little magazines. She has been living in Paris where she is completing a novel to be published shortly by Methuen. Her story in this number is her first published.

JORGE GUILLEN (1893, Valladolid, España). Doctor en Letras por la Universidad de Madrid. 1924, Catedrático de Literatura Española en las Universidades de Murcia y Sevilla. Desde 1938 reside en América. Actualmente profesor en Wellesley College, Mass. De 1919 a 1950, su obra poética está recogida en *Cántico-Fe de Vida*: 1ª edición, Madrid 1928; 2ª edición, Madrid 1936; 3ª edición, México 1945; 4ª edición, Buenos Aires 1950. Como avances del libro en preparación *Clamor - Tiempo de Historia,* han aparecido *El encanto de las sirenas,* México 1953; *Huerto de Melibea,* Madrid 1955. De inminente publicación *Luzbel desconcertado,* A l'insegna del pesce d'oro, Milano (Scheiwiller).

A. H. HEYS (Arnold Hinchcliffe, 1922, Huddersfield, England). Attended Manchester University, then was in military service in the Far East. Has published poetry in *Poetry Review* and others, but this is his first published prose.

DOMINADOR I. ILIO (1916, Malinao, Aklan, Philippines). Studied at the University of the Philippines which sent him in 1950 to University of Iowa to study for a master's degree in hydraulics. While in Iowa City, he attended the Poetry Workshop conducted by Paul Engle. Has published in *Poetry* and other reviews and anthologies; his book *The Diplomat and other Poems* appeared in 1955. He teaches at the College of Engineering, Quezon City, of which school he is secretary.

ERNST KAISER (1911, Vienna, Austria). Came as a refugee to England in 1939, served in British Army, became British subject in 1946. He lives in London, where he writes articles and reviews in *The Times Literary Supplement.* Has published a novel *Schattermann* (*Mr. Shadow,* 1946) and collaborated with his wife on translations from Goethe, Kafka, and contemporary German writers.

WALTER KERELL (1925, New York City, New York, U.S.A.). Served in the U.S. Army in the Pacific, then returned to New York to attend Columbia. Since 1949 he has lived in Paris, studying at the Sorbonne, and writing. His poems in this number are his first published work.

RAPHAEL PIERRE GILBERT LELY (1904, Paris, France). Principales publications: *Vie de Marquis de Sade,* Tome ler (Gallimard, 1952); *Ma Civilisation* (Librairie La Hune, 1954). Le second tome de sa *Vie de Sade* paraîtra au mois de decembre de la presente année.

CHRISTOPHER LEVENSON (1934, London, England). Is presently reading English at Downing College where he edits a literary review, *Delta.* He has worked as Conscientious Objector in Holland, clearing up after the floods; at a refugee children's hospital in Germany, and in forestry camps. His poems have appeared in *New Statesman and Nation, Encounter,* and *Time and Tide.* This past summer he has spent in Finland, now begins to study German and Dutch.

NORMAN LEVINE (1924, Ottowa, Canada). Attended McGill, University, Montreal, and flew with Canadian Air Force during war. He has published a novel, *The Angled Road,* and a book of verse, *The Tightrope Walker,* as well as poems in *Poetry London, Poetry Quarterly,* Swedish and Indian reviews, and poetry broadcast on B.B.C. and C.B.C.

NORRIS LLOYD (Mary N. Lloyd, 1908, Greenwood, North Carolina). Studied at Antioch College, Yellow Springs, Ohio. She is married and has four children, including an oldest son in medical school. In 1949 her family moved to Switzerland for two years, and while there she began to devote herself seriously to writing, although previously she had already published poetry and prose in various little reviews. *Dear Sisters* is her first published long work.

MICHEL MANOLL (1911, Bretagne, France). Principales oeuvres: *A Perdre Coeur* (Editions Sagesse), *La Première Chance* (La Hune). Collabore à N. R. F., *Cahiers du Sud, Poetry,* etc. *Gouttes d'Ambre* (Editions Laffont). Traducteur d'Anglais et collaborateur de la Radio-Diffusion, Télévision Française.

DOM MORAES (1938, Bombay, India). Has travelled with his father Frank Moraes, editor of the *Times* of Ceylon, and after of the *Times* of India, in those countries and in Australia, New Zealand, and South East Asia. Studied in India until August, 1955 when he came to England to enroll at Jesus College, Oxford. While waiting for the Fall, 1956, term to begin made a solitary bicycle tour of Crete and Sardinia. Has written since childhood, published in *Encounter*.

ROBERT EDLER VON MUSIL (1880, Vienna, Austria, d. 1942). Was a dedicated writer who sacrificed his profession of engineering, academic appointments, etc., in order to labor at his monumental unfinished novel — part satirical, part mystical — of which the first two volumes have been put into English as *The Man Without Qualities*. His first work, a novel, *Young Torless*, was published in English translation in 1906. The story here (one of two in a volume called *Vereinigungen* published in 1911; banned, like all of Musil's work, in Germany in 1933 and generally unobtainable today) appears for the first time in English.

CHRISTOPHER PERRET (1930, Paris, France, of French father, American mother). Is self-educated, with periods spent in assorted schools in America and France. Under the law which grants double citizenship to minors, he was obliged to serve in both French and American military forces, but found time to study at the Sorbonne and to join the Merchant Marine. He is presently living and working in New York. His poetry has appeared in *Whetstone* (Philadelphia) but this is his first published story.

RUTH PITTER (1897, Ilford, Sussex, England). Had from her schoolteacher parents « a faint but indelible smear of Greek and Latin » and began to write poetry at the age of five. Her first work appeared in 1910 in *The New Age*, whose editor A. R. Orage caused her first book to be published. Hilaire Belloc, admiring it, published her second book at his own expense. Her principal works are *A Trophy of Arms, A Mad Lady's Garland* (Hawthornden Prize, 1939), *The Bridge, Urania* (William Heinemann Award, 1954), and *The Ermine* (Queen's Medal for Poetry, 1955). During the war she turned to comic verse and produced *The Rude Potato, Ruth Pitter on Cats*, as well as unsigned prose pieces in *Punch*.

ANGELO PONSI (1920, Viareggio, Italia), dove vive tuttora, dirigendo una piccola industria di proprietà paterna. Opere: *La dichiarazione*, Einaudi, 1956.

RENZO ROSSO (1926, Trieste). Si è laureato in quella Università con una tesi su Kierkegaard. Ha collaborato a qualche settimanale con articoli per lo più di carattere musicale. Dal '50 vive e lavora a Roma, alla RAI, dove ha fatto anche alcuni lavori per il Terzo Programma. Un suo radiodramma dal titolo *Un servizio di guerra* ha vinto recentemente il primo premio del Concorso Nazionale per opere di prosa indetto dalla RAI.

ANTONIO SOUZA (1928, Ciudad de México, Mexico). Es ingeniero mecánico electricista. Ha publicado *Arenas,* 1950; *Cain,* 1951; *Pequeño viaje,* 1952 (poesía); y *El niño y el árbol,* 1955 (prosa). Ha escrito dos novelas, cuentos y obras de teatro no publicadas. Dirige actualmente una galería de arte.

MURIEL SPARK (1918, Edinburgh, Scotland). Lived for some years in Southern Rhodesia, was for a time editor of *Poetry Review,* has written critical biographies of Mary Shelley and Emily Bronte, has also edited the poems and letters of the latter. Has published a volume of verse, *The Fanfarlo,* and contributed to many journals. Her first novel will appear soon from Macmillan-London.

ELLIOTT STEIN (1929, Brooklyn, New York, USA). Has lived in Paris for several years. His stories have appeared in the New Directions anthologies and in the Partisan Review Avon Book of Modern Writing. He wrote the libretto *A Childhood Miracle* (after Hawthorne's *The Snow Image*) which was set by Ned Rorem and recently performed in New York. He is currently working at another opera libretto and a book of poems.

GEORGE STEINER (1929, Paris, France, American citizenship). Studied at the University of Chicago and later at Harvard where he was awarded the Bell Prize in American Literature. Elected a Rhodes Scholar to Oxford, he received there the Chancellor's Essay Prize in 1952 and joined the staff of *The Economist* in London. At present he is at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, and is working on new translations of Villon. He has published in *The Paris Review, Harper's, Poetry,* and others.

JEANNE TERRACINI (1911, Alger, Algérie). A fait ses études au lycée d'Alger et à l'Université de lettres d'Alger. En 1946 a publié *Un enfant est mort,* recueil de nouvelles, aux éditions Charlot; en 1951 *Chroniques de l'Usure,* chez Gallimard. Elle a traduit de l'Italien des textes de Moravia et Silone, et d'anglais les livres d'Arthur Koestler.

JAIME GARCIA TERRES (1924, Ciudad de México, México). Dirige actualmente la revista « Universidad de México » y otras actividades culturales de la propia institución. Ensayos: *Panorama de la crítica literaria en México,* 1941; *Sobre la responsabilidad del escritor,* 1949. Poesía: *El hermano menor,* 1953; *Correo nocturno,* 1954; *Las provincias del aire* (en prensa).

ROLANDO S. TINIO (1937, Manila, Philippines). Was educated at the University of Santo Tomas at Manila in the Philippines. Currently he is working toward the degree of Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing (Poetry) at the University of Iowa.

RUTHVEN TODD (1914, Edinburgh, Scotland). Lived in or near London until 1947 when he went to the United States to teach in Iowa. He has written or edited some fifty-odd books, among them books of verse: *A Mantelpiece of Shells, The Planet in My Hand;* novels: *The Lost Traveller* and *Loser's Choice;* children's books: *SpaceCat,* etc.; along with ten detective novels under another name. He edited Gilchrist's *Life of Blake* for Everyman Editions, and a selection of Blake's poems. He lives currently at Martha's Vineyard, Mass.

EMMANUEL TORRES (1932, Manila, Philippines). Was educated at the Jesuit college Ateneo de Manila efore winning in 1955 a Fulbright Travel Grant to go to the United States. Later he won a Smith-Mundt Scholarship at the State University of Iowa where he is studying for a M.A. in English. He has published poetry in the Philippines (where he is known as well as art critic) and in *Poetry.*

CESARE VIVALDI (1925, Imperia, Italia). Attualmente vive a Roma. Opere: *Otto poesie in dialetto ligure* (ed. Canzoniere, 1951); *Ode all'Europa* (ed. La sera, 1953); *Il cuore d'una volta* (ed. Sciascia, 1956).

ARTURO VIVANTE (1923, Roma, Italia). Opere: *Poesie,* Venezia, 1951.

J. R. WILCOCK (1919, Buenos Aires, Argentina). De familia angloitaliana. Ha vivido en la Argentina, Inglaterra e Italia y ha publicado seis tomos de poesía, una tragedia en verso — *Los Traidores* — y un libro de cuentos.

EITHNE WILKINS (1914, Wellington, New Zealand). Has published poetry in many English and American periodicals and anthologies, including a long poem *Oranges and Lemons* in *Botteghe Oscure* No. XIV,

and translations from German, French, and Italian. She and her husband, Ernst Kaiser, have been translating and writing on Musil since 1949 and have been awarded a Bollingen Foundation Fellowship to write a critical introduction to his work.

NOEL WOODIN (1929, London, England). Was educated at Catesham and University College, London. He has lived in most of the Southern Counties of England, has now settled in remoter Gloucestershire where he helps train racehorses for a living, doing what is known as « riding-work ». His poems have been published in *Nimbus* and other reviews and broadcast on the B.B.C.

GAMEL WOOLSEY (1909, Breeze Hill Plantation, near Aiken, South Carolina). Was educated at home before living for a while in Charleston. Was an actress in New York, then visited England and married the English writer Gerald Brenan and went with him to live in Spain in a remote section near Malaga. Has published three books: *Middle Earth,* poetry; *Death's Other Kingdom,* an account of life in a village during the Spanish Civil War; and *Spanish Fairy Tales* collected from the old women who told them in the Sierra Nevada.

(*Omitted from No. XVI*:)

ANTONIA WILDE (1930, Durazzo, Albania, English parentage). Travelled widely before 1940 in Persia, Greece, Jugoslavia, Holland, Egypt, Argentine, etc., with her father, a geologist, being educated intermittently. Attended St. Swithuns for seven years. « Survived that. No University ». Married at 19, has son aged 6. Apprenticed herself to Ronald Duncan for three years, and offers in *Canzon*: *In your Respite* her first published work.

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Particolare di una raffineria del gruppo E.N.I. vista dal pittore Emilio Vedova.

Detail of a refinery of the E.N.I. group as seen by the painter Emilio Vedova.

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